

THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

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**Author's Note:**

Before you begin reading the culmination of a year's worth of work for my thesis, I want to give you an overview of how I have prepared it for you today. I have tried to write as much as I can for this project, and it comes in at an astounding 47,000 words. It's been a long school year trying to get all of this out, but I wanted to focus on getting the story out rather than perfecting or honing the writing itself. So, I put off revision for as long as possible. Part 1 of this novel has been revised, but I was unable to get to parts 2 or 3 revised. While you're reading, you may find some inconsistencies between part 1 and later parts. A lot has changed in revisions, including plot points and character names. I have tried to address these as much as I can, but I wanted to warn you in case things have slipped through the cracks.

Since I realize there may be differences in knowledge of media, I've gone ahead and added footnotes to let you know when I'm referencing something specific, especially if it's one that other readers more like myself might recognize.

I'll let you get to reading now. I'll talk to you again before part 2.

PART 1

Chapter 01

When my girlfriend shakes me awake, the first thing I see is monster creeping towards her across the bedroom floor.

“Audrey, wake up. I gotta go,” she says.

“Okay,” I yawn. As I sit up, I glance again at the monster crouched on the floor just beyond the other side of the bed. It’s a hulking, neck-less beast, just a bit smaller than a human. Viscera drips from its black skin. I hope it doesn’t stain the carpet. I roll my shoulders, sore from last night’s boxing practice. “Don’t freak out, but there’s a monster behind you.”

Clara tenses, raising up slowly on her knees. Tremors run through her body and shake the entire bed. The monster places a wet, clawed hand on the sheet.

“Just remember what I taught you,” I say. “Sing to it, and it will go away. You just gotta choose something inappropriate.”

She nods, quietly singing random, nonsense words until she gets to, “*Oh, death. Oh, death—*”<sup>1</sup>

“Oh, god, really? That’s the song you chose?” I shake my head. The bed frame creaks beneath the weight of the creature climbing up with us. Groaning, it raises a hand towards the back of Clara’s head, stretching for her blonde curls. “*Hey*. Stop it.”

My sharp tone takes it aback, and it pauses. It stares at me with black, void-like eyes.

“Go find her clothes so she can get dressed.” It hesitates, and I snap my fingers. “Go on!”

The monster slinks off the bed, and the blood that had pooled there dissipates. As it goes about gathering the clothes strewn across the room, I turn back to Clara. She covers her face with her hands.

“Ugh, I’m so bad at this... dissipation stuff, or whatever you call it.”

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<sup>1</sup>“Oh Death” is a traditional American folksong from the early 1920s.

“Well, that would have been subversion, but don’t worry about it. You’ll get better.”

The monster returns holding Clara’s clothes. I nudge her and encourage her to interact with it. Grimacing, she takes her clothes back one by one, clutching each article between her thumb and forefinger before placing them beside her on the bed.

“Thank you,” I say. “Now go lay down.”

I hold my breath until it stalks off, then I sigh. I recline on the bed and watch Clara dress, letting my eyes trace over the curves of her body I know so well. As soon as she’s donned all of her clothes, the blood disappears from them. She sighs.

“God, how can you just do that?” she asks.

“Do what?”

“Talk to that thing? It’s so gross.”

“I mean, we see plenty of creepy things. I’ve seen things a lot worse than that Dorito-shaped beast.”

She scrunches up her nose. “I guess. I’m just glad all that...*red stuff* got off my clothes.”

Somewhere outside the bedroom sounds clinking metal.

“Sounds like Father is making breakfast,” I say. “Be extra careful sneaking out.”

She nods as she pulls on her ballet flats. I search for a tee-shirt on the floor of my room, and by the time I’ve pulled one on, Clara already has her back half out of the window, clinging to the white lattice on the side of the house.

“I’ll see you in math?” I ask as I approach the window.

“Yeah.” We kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Once Clara's nearly at the bottom, I close the window. After a quick shower, I try heading downstairs, but the monster is: one, still around; and two, following at my heels. I try to get it to leave me alone, but it grabs onto my sleeve and looks up at me with these two big eyes surrounded with blood... It's too sweet to leave behind.

"Fine," I say, "but stay out of trouble."

The single line that serves as its mouth turns up in a smile.

In the kitchen, Dad slides an omelet onto a plate, and Mother holds the morning paper between her hands. She folds down the top so only her brown eyes are seen.

"Good morning," she says. She raises a brow at the monster. "What's that?"

"It showed up this morning. It wanted to attack me, but I yelled at it, and now it's just been helping me out around the house."

"It didn't disappear after that?"

I shake my head.

Mom puts her newspaper on the table and puts her hands on her hips while she looks it over. The two of them are almost eye-level with Mom just a few inches taller. When she crouches to inspect it closer, her gray pencil skirt stretches over her hips.

"With prom coming up, it's a good bet that a Writer put it here. Best not to fight against this one if it's been listening to you. Besides, if we keep it close, we can make sure it doesn't get up to any shenanigans." She pats its head and grimaces when the viscera there wipes off on her. "You're not staying in the house if you're going to be dripping this everywhere, though."

The bloody liquid seems to soak into the monster's skin and evaporates from Mom's hand with a fine mist. She smiles.

"It's kind of cute."

I shake my head and turn to Dad. He brings over three plates of omelets for us and lays them at our spots on the kitchen table.

“Are you feeling okay?” I ask. I sit down and cut my omelet open with a fork. There’s nothing gourmet about the dish. It’s just eggs, cheese, and ham.

“I tried not to make them, but I couldn’t help myself. I’m really Foggy,” Dad says. “Some Writer must be setting us up for an opening scene — maybe a film script? You know how they only care to get cheap and simple meals prepared for those.”

He joins us at the table and peeks behind my chair. The monster has curled up behind my chair on the floor and lays curled up. Yeah, Mom’s right. It *is* kind of cute.

“That’s good, though,” says Mom. “If we’re the opening scene, that means Audrey’s probably going to be one of the main protagonists at prom.”

Dad nods in agreement. “Don’t pretend you’re not feeling it, too, Jolene.” Dad smiles at me. “You should have seen her this morning. She was talking about joining the PTA.”

“Wow.” I chuckle. “That’d be interesting. You wanna join the coven, Mother?”

She rolls her eyes. “Your father talked me out of it. No worries,” she says. “But only one of them has died since they formed in ninety-three, so that’s a pretty good track record.”

Father grins. “And Helen Biers makes a *killer* pumpkin pie.”

My parents laugh loudly at the joke, but I can’t even manage a chuckle. I hadn’t known the kid the PTA cannibalized, but it still leaves a bad taste in my mouth. It easily could have been Clara they’d sacrificed. I pick at my omelet and see a particularly fleshy piece of ham inside. I force myself to eat it. I guess I’m glad Mom isn’t the villainous type.

Once it’s time to leave for school, both my parents kiss me goodbye as they do every day. The monster tries following me, but Father steps in its way.

“Oh, no. You’re helping me with housework today.”

The monster doesn’t have eyebrows so its expressions are hard to read, but by the gape of its mouth and slump of its shoulders, it looks comically upset. I blow a kiss at them all before I leave.

My headphones blast indie music into my ears. It’s not the best for drowning out the screams from the house on the hill, but it’s enrapturing and calms me more than anything else, and with prom in a little over twenty-four hours, I need as much *calm* as I can get.

I find the eyesore of the neighborhood two streets away. The houses on my street are the epitome of Midwest Americana, but in Withering Pines, huge looming mansions create the bulk of the elegant Rococo buildings, each heavily weathered and owned by the wealthiest people of Quiet Knoll. The eyesore, however, varies wildly from the other houses and is an experimental architect’s dream. A white dome encircles the base of a thick spire stretching six stories into the air. On the uppermost level, glass forms every wall and shows off the fanciful office there. Only the garden resembles the rest of the neighborhood, though it’s impeccably kept rather than allowed to run wild.

Sergei sits on a bench in the midst of the left-side garden, a cigarette hanging loosely from his lips as he thumbs through the pages of some thick tome. I whistle, and he immediately puts his book in the backpack nestled between his feet and stubs out the cigarette on the metal arm of the bench. He joins me wordlessly, stuffing the cigarette butt into a tin he keeps in his back pocket. The warmth of the morning has left a thin sheen of sweat on his brown forehead, but he doesn’t seem to notice. When we begin walking, Sergei is, oddly, the first to break the silence.

“You’re going to prom tomorrow, right?”



I remove my headphones from my ears and drape them over my shoulder. With every step, they bounce and tap against the patch of skin exposed by my scoop-back blouse.

“Not much of a choice, right?”

“I thought you might try risking staying home,” he says. “I’m sure you could survive.”

I sniff. “Probably, but I’d still rather have the entire senior and junior classes to distract potential killers than just my parents.”

“Fair enough.”

“Do I even need to ask if *you’re* going?”

He smiles. “There are three days until invitations to apply for the Association of Exceptional Characters go out, and prom is going to be make or break. If we can’t make that story interesting, there’s no way in hell we’re going to move forward.”

I had expected to see him more disheveled than usual — some sign that he’s been thinking too much about the possibility of death tomorrow, or more likely that he’s nervous about whether or not he’ll get an AEC invite. But there’s nothing. He’s dressed as dapperly as ever, sleeves of his white button-up rolled to his elbows, and his black vest neatly pressed, a nice contrast to his dark-wash jeans. His neat, black dreadlocks, perfect coils, hang well down his back and are tied loosely together with a hair-tie.

“You gonna bring a weapon?” I ask.

“And risk breaking the immersion of prom? No way. I’m aiming for top marks.”

“I might do it. If it means I can avoid becoming the protag tomorrow...”

“If a Writer really wants you to be the protagonist, that’s not going to stop them. Honestly, you’re just gonna give them something to use against you.”

“Yeah, I was afraid you would say that.”

We walk the rest of the time in silence, and when I began hearing screams in the distance, I place my headphones back into my ears to drown out the eerie noises. We reach school ten minutes before classes start, so we separate to our lockers and say we'll talk in Lifestyles. Our brief conversation from earlier lurks in my mind, but once I reach Calculus and see Clara already there, helping the girls who sit behind her with last night's assignment, relaxation washes over me. I join Clara, and we share a quick peck. The girls she was talking to look a bit uncomfortable, but neither of them say anything, and once Clara starts helping them again, they return to how they were.

When we'd started dating six months ago, I had feared it would lead to an arc of downfall for Clara. It's a common script — the popular girl fallen from grace by her debaucherous relationship with another woman. Blonde-haired and blue-eyed, she already falls victim to so many other tropes. I figured she'd fall to that one, too. But she must be too sweet, too lovable, for that to happen. The Writers must favor her because while some of her friends had seemed obviously discomfited by our relationship, all of them had accepted it and accepted me.

I struggle through math (it's honors Calculus, but without Clara, I know I'd fail), and when we reach homeroom, Clara turns her desk to mine and grabs my hands.

"Are you excited?" she asks.

I cock my head. "About what?"

"Prom, of course!"

When I grimace in reaction, she rolls her eyes. "Oh, come on. It's going to be fun. Don't worry about it. We're all going to have a great dinner at Sergei's, and we'll have an even better time at the dance."

"Until people start dying."

“People don’t die *every* year. And just because the Writers are focusing on this year’s prom doesn’t even mean anyone’s going to die. We’ll just get a little spooked and then laugh about it when we get home.”

I squeeze her hands. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because I have to be.” Her face becomes a little sterner, a little more serious. “I know I’m one of the people most at risk tomorrow. But I can’t do anything about it except make it the best situation that I can.”

“You could fight it. You could try the tactics I’ve given you—”

“I’ve honestly tried, and I can’t do it. There’s a reason I’m in remedial Lifestyles.”

The ringing bell brings with it a wash of relief. I hadn’t been looking forward to Lifestyles, but if it means getting away from *this* conversation, I’ll take it a hundred times over. I rip my hands from Clara’s and quickly gather up my backpack.

“See you at lunch,” I mumble, and I leave the classroom before she can catch up with me.

I reach my classroom pretty early, but I wait outside until Cate shows up before I venture inside. Cate and I have been friends all through high school, and she’s one of the weirdest girls I know. Despite having no interest in anyone, she pulls off *manic pixie dream girl* really well. Her head is shaved with just the slightest show of stubble, and she has lilies painted behind her ear today, the stems and leaves stretching down beneath the tight collar of her blouse.

“You okay?” she asks as we take our usual seats near the front.

I nod. “Just got into kind of a fight, I guess, with Clara just now.”

“Prom?”

“Yeah.”

We both look up when Tommy sits in the seat directly in front of me. He's a beanpole of a guy who unfortunately can gain fifteen pounds in a week if he eats much more than some salad. Lately he's been trying to embrace the *nerdy Asian kid* trope (it has a much higher life expectancy than what he naturally tends to, *funny fat kid*).

"What's up?" he asks. He and Cate share a complicated handshake I never learned, and I smile when they finish off with an explosion.

"We were just talking about prom," says Cate.

"Ugh, don't remind me," he says. "Dinner is going to be horrible."

Sergei's the last to come in, and the bell rings just as he sits down. Mr. Ingram gathers the class's attention with a loud clap.

"Glad everyone could make it," says Mr Ingram. "We've got a lot to cover today. As you all know, tomorrow is one of the most important and dangerous days of your lives: prom."

I slide a notebook from my backpack and find a blank page to take notes as I keep my eyes on the teacher. He holds the look I'd been searching for in Sergei. His brown hair is messed in the back as though he forgot to brush a spot and dark bags hang beneath his eyes. His clothes are disheveled, and his button-up bears a honey-colored stain right over the heart. He leans back against a small table in the front of the room, tapping his pen against his thigh.

"This is the first time since 1999 that we've had Writers focusing on prom as a subject. Most of you will have learned from your siblings or older friends that prom is a time of happiness, revelation, and the end of a character arc. This will not be your prom. Can anyone tell me what happened after the 1999 prom?"

Sergei's hand shoots up.

“Compounded by other fairly brutal stories being written around the world, several states and countries decided to revolt against the Writers in what become known as the New Millennium Purge, which resulted in approximately one-point-three million deaths genre-wide.”

Mr. Ingram nods. “Many of you probably know someone who was affected by this. It may have been your own family. It’s speculated that the Writers conspired to climax all current projects at the same time, resulting in narrative cross-contamination and exceptional death tolls. At the end, the Writers worked with world leaders to create the Association of Exceptional Characters which would help mitigate deaths through the implementation of your Lifestyles classes.

“My job is to teach the remedial students to give into the instinctual Fog and embrace tropes and clichés. They form the bulk of the stories. I teach the general students to stay as meaningless background characters in other people’s lives. I teach *you*, who are considered to be the best of the best in our school, how to create meaningful, powerful stories.”

Mr. Ingram straightened up and walked to the chalkboard. “Now let’s review...”

Class carries on with a lecture about the day at hand, everything from history and notable scripts to subversion techniques and potential homages. It takes the rest of class. When the bell rings, Mr. Ingram looks fifteen years older as he stares at the clock.

“Okay,” he says over the shuffling of students gathering up their things. “I wish you all the best of luck this weekend. Make great stories. I hope to see all of you on Monday.”

Chapter 02

“Is Clara not joining us today?”

Kate nods to the empty spot between me and Sergei. Next to her, Harry looks up from the empty space a lunch should have occupied in front of him.

“It’s Friday, so she’s sitting with Amanda and them,” I say after swallowing a mouthful of sandwich.

Father packed my meal in a Wonder Woman lunch box, and the meal is more Americana than usual — an artisanal sandwich, gluten-free chips, and an organic juice box. He only starts creating American meals (see: cheap, easy, simple prop pieces for Writers) when he has a hard time fighting off the Fog. The Writers must be heightening our reception to it as we grow closer to P-day.

Kate shrugs, popping a chicken nugget from her lunch tray into her mouth.

“I just figured with prom tomorrow she might want to sit with you since, you know, it might be her last chance.”

I grimace, placing my sandwich back in its Tupperware. Next to Kate, Harry looks up from his book to stare enviously at my sandwich. I shut it up inside my lunch box and lean on top of it, causing him to go back to reading. He’s neither brought his own lunch nor purchased one today, and I’m surprised at his self-control. The last thing he needs to do before Prom is binge his way back into *Fat Kid*. I look back to Kate.

Kate stutters, “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like... I just, you know, I thought... I’ll shut up.”

Beside me, Sergei nods. “Yeah, that’s probably for the best.”

Everyone came to class today. I didn’t hear a single missed name in role call, and looking around the cafeteria, only a dozen seats remain empty. Some of the voices I catch seem excited

about the day to come, but most are subdued and quiet. It's a relief to know that most people understand the gravity of prom.

As my eyes scan the lunchroom, I start to look past Kate until I see her and Harry's faces melt into unified terror. They both open their mouths, and just as I start turning around to see what it is, something warm and gooey presses into my back and a plastic clatter sounds behind me.

"Oops. My bad."

Jimmy Hartford stands behind me, his lunch tray lying on the ground just behind me seat. Kate grabs her napkins and begins wiping the gunk off my back, and when I look back, I see trails of gravy on her napkins. I glare at Jimmy, who smiles down at me with bright, perfect teeth.

"What the fuck?"

Sergei and I get to our feet simultaneously, and my fists clench at my sides. Jimmy Hartford and his two lackeys — Jim and Tim, Will and Bill, Craig and Chaig, some stupid combination like that — back him up with crooked grins and arms crossed over their chests. They're considerably uglier than their leader, though that's not saying much. Jimmy has a jock's body and cheekbones that could cut glass, and if I wasn't gay and he wasn't the world's biggest douchecanoe, I might find him attractive.

"It was an accident," he says.

"Accident, my ass." I step closer to him. "You better pony up some money to pay for this shirt."

"I'm sure the potatoes will wash out." He nods to the table. "Where's your carpet-munching girlfriend?"

I start reeling back one of my hands, but Sergei grabs it. He gives me a sharp look, then turns to Jimmy.

“You need to leave. Now.”

Jimmy laughs and runs a hand through his golden hair. “Need your boyfriend to protect you?”

“So you’re gonna make fun of me for being gay and then say I have a boyfriend in the same breath?” I snap.

“Every dyke needs her beard.”

Sergei slides between me and Jimmy so he’s chest-to-chest with him. “Let me remind you that Audrey is our state champion boxer, so I don’t think she needs me protecting her. I’m just here to make sure she doesn’t need to dirty her hands with garbage like you.”

Sergei’s got a couple inches on Jimmy, but he doesn’t have the same kind of training and muscles Jimmy’s gotten from half a dozen years on the lacrosse team. Still, after sizing him up, Jimmy puts his hands up and backs away a few steps.

“Like I said. It was an accident.” He smiles again. “See you guys at prom.”

I watch him leave, body shaking as I barely contain myself from doing something incredibly regrettable.

“Sergei, I’m gonna fucking kill him,” I say.

“Yeah, I know.” Sergei takes a handful of napkins and helps Kate clear chunks of meatloaf off my back. “Go steal a shirt from the lost and found and change. You’re not gonna want to wear this all day.”

Thankfully my only class with Jimmy is Lifestyles, so I won’t see him for the rest of the day. He was shockingly quiet today, but I’m sure next week — assuming he survives prom —



he'll be his usual, obnoxious, contrary self. I still can't help but worry about what he said before leaving. Does he have some kind of plan for prom? Were his words foreshadowing that he'd be Saturday night's villain? If so, good for me. Jimmy's only a human, and humans can be killed.

At the end of the day during art class, I rant as much to Kate as I can without repeating what she saw for herself, then turn to texting Clara.

Clara [1:47PM]: OMG I can't believe that. What an asshole. I'm sorry that happened to you, baby. :(

Audrey [1:47PM]: its ok, its not your fault. is amanda still friends with him?

Clara [1:49PM]: Yeah. :/ Every time I try to tell her about what a dick he is, she just says, "Oh, well he's so nice to ME." Like? That doesn't make him a good person??

Clara [1:54PM]: Are we walking home together after school?

Audrey [1:57PM]: nah, im gonna hit the gym for a bit. i dont think I'll be able to hang out tonight either. apparently mother's got some "training" planned

Clara [1:58PM]: Okay. I'll see you tomorrow then. :) Love you! :\*<sup>2</sup>

Audrey [1:59PM]: love you too

There's only a couple of other people in the weight room after school, and when I start practicing on the speed bag, I imagine it's Jimmy's head that's rattling back and forth. I've worn off a lot of my anger by the time I get to the body—sized punching bag. All I can think of now is the night to come. My vision keeps turning red as my bangs fall into my eyes, and after the fourth time I have to push them back, I give up and hit the showers. I do everything I can to stall getting home, but I still return before five. Dad cooked chicken and vegetables; the Fog is

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<sup>2</sup>Kissy-face Emoticon

definitely getting him bad. We get three bites into eating before Mother brings up the dreaded subject.

“So, I’ve got three scripts prepared for us to review,” she says. “I figure we can watch *Carrie* tonight, and then we’ll get to *Prom Night* tomorrow morning? The Association of Exceptional Characters published an article about tomorrow’s featured author, and I forwarded that to your email. Have you had a chance to check it out? If not, that’s okay. You can look at it before bed. I figure we can get started right after dinner, and then—”

“Can we not?” It comes out much louder and harsher than I mean. “Sorry,” I say immediately and look down at my dinner. I push a piece of chicken with my fork. “It’s just been a rough day even on top of thinking about the dance. Can we just treat tonight like I might not actually die tomorrow?”

“But, honey, that’s why we’re doing all this — to make sure you have the best chance at survival.”

“I know, but I just want...” Tears well up in my eyes, and I scowl through them. “Please?”

Mom starts to say something, but Dad interrupts.

“Let her relax tonight. We’ll still have plenty of time to watch the sacred scripts tomorrow, and she can use tonight to cool off.”

I look up, and Mother visibly struggles with the decision before she sighs. “Okay,” she says, “but we’re getting up at eight tomorrow to make sure we get through all of it.”

I agree, and the rest of dinner is actually pleasurable. We avoid talking about prom, and for a little bit, I’m able to forget about it. My parents and I watch a script from Comedy, and when it’s over, I go upstairs and find the monster from this morning curled up on my bed. I

jump, having completely forgotten about it. It looks up at me and growls, but I quickly cover up my weakness with a stern face. It sits back on its malformed legs, and when I rub its head, it leans into my touch.

“Thanks for stopping with the whole ‘dripping blood’ thing. I appreciate that.” It stares up at me wordlessly with its black eyes. “Just don’t watch me change, okay? I don’t need you to be a peeping tom.”

I think it looks offended, but maybe I’m just imagining it. Either way, it lays back down and goes to sleep. When I finally climb in, I have to nudge it with my feet to get it to move to the far end so I can actually stretch out.

I hold my phone above my face and check my email. The email Mom sent me just says “Quiet Knoll Prom Head Writer.” I get as far as opening it — it’s some guy I’ve never heard of Jonathon Crein — then move the email to the trash. I don’t have the energy for this. I nudge my monster with my feet.

“Keep me safe, bud,” I say as I turn off my light. It growls again, and I smile despite myself.

I check my phone first thing when I wake up to several text messages.

Sergei [5:34AM]: remember: no weapons today. we get by with our smarts. ingram taught us well, we’re gonna be fine

Sergei [5:34AM]: and if we do well enough maybe the AEC will invite us. app invites go out monday!!

Clara [7:32AM]: Good morning! :) I can’t wait to see you tonight. Love you, and have fun with your parents!

I ignore Sergei's messages and text Clara back. I'd much rather think about her looking beautiful in a prom dress than trying to get into the Association of Exceptional Characters or how tonight's going to affect my chances. There's only one goal tonight: make sure I and everyone I care about survives.

My monster follows me downstairs for breakfast, and it's everything I could have feared: bacon, eggs, and toast. I gape at the plates Dad's laid out, these horribly simplistic dishes found in every American Horror script.

"Dad—"

Both my parents look shocked. I haven't called him "Dad" since I was a young kid, before they taught me otherwise. We're a close family, and while "Dad" always seems a more natural thing to call him, "Father" is formal and strange. My parents explained it to me as creating a disconnect between our actual relationship — close — and the relationship that the word "Father" implies — distant. It confuses the Writers, muddles the story. I haven't slipped up in a decade, and I slap my hand over my mouth.

"This is gonna be a rough day for everyone," Dad says, and I have to agree.

The conversation remains stilted for the first couple of minutes, but in perfect Dad fashion, my father attempts to better the situation by changing the subject.

"Is Clara excited about tonight?" he asks.

"Yeah."

Mom snorts. "Well, I'm not surprised. She's a regular Hitchcock broad."

"Mother."

"I'm just saying. You'd be a lot better going with Sergei as a date. We've worked very hard to keep you alive this long, you know."

From giving their daughter an older, outdated name to making sure to dye my hair from its natural honey brown to a flaming red-orange, they've done a lot to keep me away from any of the dangerous stereotypes we see in the scripts. But my "condition," as Mother calls it — nothing can save me from that.

When I told my parents I was gay, Mother cried. It hurt at first, but I understood. The gay kids always die. Dad was just thankful I wasn't bisexual; they have an even higher mortality rate. They tried to convince me to act straight. If I did that, maybe I could fool the Writers. I told them I wouldn't do that, though, and Mom cried harder.

Needless to say, they're still struggling with the idea.

"Clara is a high-risk girl," Dad adds. "I mean, she's blonde, busty, beautiful. The only way she could be more high-risk is if she was named something like *Brittany*."

My cheeks warm. "Just stop, guys. It's gonna be fine."

"I'm sure it'll all be fine for you," Mother says. "Just try to keep any kissing or whatnot to a minimum, okay?"

We make no conversation for the rest of the meal. It's not until I've washed the dishes and stand idly by the sink that Mother comes over to me and entreats me to go to the living room. My stomach turns at the thought, but it has to be done — or rather, it should be, if I want to up my chances of living.

"What do you think of Crein?" Mom asks.

I stutter a moment, trying to remember who he is. "Oh, uh, he seems... great?"

She sighs. "Did you even read the email I sent you?"

Oh yeah. That's where I saw the name.

"Of course."

“What kind of works does he write?”

Several seconds go by. I stutter out, “Horror... stuff?” Mom is not amused. She puts a disk into the DVD player before she grabs a notepad and pencil and comes to join us.

“You couldn’t even glance through it?” She sits on the other side of me and hands me the notepad. “Jonathon Crein will be writing the main story. Do you remember him? He’s a strong up-and-coming Writer. He orchestrated Valentine’s Day last year in Amityville and has been Writing smaller stories since then. No one really of note for the people Writing under him. I grabbed one of his scripts from the store, though — his most recent work. Should hopefully give you something to think about for tonight.”

The past two Valentine’s Days for Quiet Knoll have been uneventful. We had an incident with a love potion gone wrong, but otherwise there’s been nothing. But I remember the Lifestyles class afterward, when we talked about what happened in Amityville. Even Mr. Ingram, who is rarely shocked by what the Writers do, sweat during class. It had been bloody, but it *had* been brutal, a heart motif used throughout. When I’d first heard of it, I hadn’t been impressed. It sounded like quite a few other things we had studied. But Mr. Ingram said that the Writer who’d orchestrated it — who had only killed four people! — showed a lot of promise.

I’ve seen *Carrie* and *Prom Night* a dozen times before, so I take sparse notes to fill up the time. It’s all pretty basic stuff — never go off alone, don’t be an asshole, etc. The third script, though, is something different. It’s Crein’s most recent film, and he’s grown a lot since *Heart Breaker* two years ago. *Jaybird* follows the psychological breakdown of a teenage girl who is already estranged from many of her classmates for being deaf. It’s unsettling. It makes me hold my breath and sit back in my chair, and while I’m never terrified, I’m always uncomfortable.

My notes for *Jaybird* consist of

- The past come back to haunt
- Psychological trauma
- Motifs — hearts, jaybirds, what next?
- Focus on teenage girls estranged from peers

It doesn't spell a whole lot of good for me.

Mother wants to talk about *Jaybird* when we've finished, but it's already half past three, and we're supposed to go to Sergei's at six for dinner. I promise to talk about it later, and go up to my room, monster on my heels. I lay in bed and gather the monster up to my chest so that it curls up against my side. I mean to take a nap, but instead I end up reading the article my mother sent me, digging it out of my email's trash bin. The article talks about how all of Crein's work has focused on psychological horror and dragging out people's pasts to haunt them in the present. Lately, it's been less gore and more trauma. All of his movies have focused on teenage girls considered "different" from their peers — from the deaf girl in *Jaybird* to an anxiety-ridden loner in *Heart Breaker*.

Audrey [3:43PM]: you sure you want to go tonight? i bet we could get away with just staying home...

Clara [3:47PM]: You know that wouldn't work, baby. I'm sorry. But I believe in us. We'll make it work tonight. :)

God, I hope she's right.

Chapter 03

I put off getting ready as long as I can. I nap for maybe half an hour before I force myself out of bed. I look towards my closet door and feel my stomach drop. God, I don't even want to look at it.

The dress sits in my closet like a noose, waiting for me to slip it on. I ignore it and choose to do my makeup and hair first. I keep my makeup natural and spend nearly an hour straightening my thick hair. When mom knocks on the door to check on me, I have her make sure my eyeliner is symmetrical before sending her away. I tell my monster to fetch my gown.

I picked the dress myself, using the same precision and carefulness I use with my Halloween costumes. The chiffon bodice wraps tight around my waist, and the evergreen skirt puffs out at the bottom, the gold petticoat barely peeking from beneath. Matching gold lace covers my clavicle, neck, and arms to keep me modest. When I first purchased it, I was afraid that my shoulders and arms would be too muscular for the sleeves (it's been a problem before), but it fits perfectly.

I look at myself in the full-length mirror on the back of my door, and my heart flutters. I can't deny how good I look, and it brings a proud smile to my face despite the circumstances.

"I should dress like this more often," I say, turning back and forth to twirl the skirt.

Finally finished, I go downstairs to show my parents. They sit in the living room on the couch, half-cuddled with each other while Mom both of them read. They put their books down when they hear me come in, and smiles break out on both their faces.

"Audrey, you're so..." Mom bites back her comment. Her eyes are glossy with tears.

"Thanks," I say. "Best five-hundred dollars you ever spent?"



They laugh, and Mother ushers me into the backyard so she can take pictures of me. Of course we'll take couples photos at Sergei's, but I know she wants a picture of just me, in our own yard. I wonder how many times prom photos like these have been used in funeral services just days after being taken.

When all is done, we all go back inside so my parents can get dressed. I distract myself on my phone while they're gone, convinced to do anything that doesn't require me to think about what kind of nightmare is coming up. They come down with fifteen minutes left before we need to be at Sergei's, so we load up in Mother's car and make our way over (after I give my monster a kiss on the head). When I text Sergei we're coming over, he says we can just walk in.

We reach the towering eyesore of the Withering Pines neighborhood and park on the street in front of it. I check out the other cars, and it seems everyone else is already here. The sun reflects off the glass-encircled top floor, and the front garden greets us with splashes of colorful flowers as we make our way to the front door, and I rap a few quick knocks before pushing it open.

A huge grin immediately spreads over my face. I can never repress my love for this place, and I love seeing it filled with people. Most everyone is down here — teens and parents alike, all beautiful. Clara and Sergei's parents seem to be the only two missing. The two dozen people in the living room greet us upon entering, and my parents and I go through the motions of greeting everyone — Kate and her parents, Sergei, Harry and his mom, Deval (Sergei's date) and her parents — until we reach Clara's parents. Her father is pleasant enough, but her mother has never liked me and won't even look at me, keeping her pinched face looking way from me. I'm glad Clara takes after her father.

"Where's Clara?" I ask.

“She went upstairs to help the Jacksons set the table for dinner,” says Mr. Daniels.

I make a face, pleased that she’d go out of her way for a family she has never met before.

“She even insisted we get here early so she could offer the most help,” her mother adds.

She continues looking away from me.

I glance around the room to ensure that everyone else is down here. It’s easy to see the entire floor, composed of eight flat walls to allow the display of *avant garde* art in the octagonal space. Their television takes up half of a wall and it’s flanked with bookcases filled with DVDs and gaming discs of all genres, and the entertainment stand beneath the television holds a half-dozen gaming systems. Every window in this room has a heavy curtain hanging above it, ready to be lowered for optimal watching or playing. And sure enough, hanging around is every single guest and their parents, with only Sergei’s and Clara missing.

I’m about to say that I’ll head upstairs and help (the floors are divided by function). I turn towards the center of the room, where a black pillar circled with crystal stair stands, but before I can take a step towards it, someone is already coming gently down the glittering path into the living room.

It feels like the floor has disappeared beneath me. Clara is incredible. A tight-fitted dress contours her body, flaring out slightly at the knees. The dress is the same bright shade of red as her lipstick. Her hair falls in perfect blonde curls down her shoulders and back, framing her face. Around her neck hangs a beautiful necklace composed of beautiful gray gems that reflect in a way that it looks as though she has a halo. I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful.

“Audrey!” Her azure eyes light up when she sees me, and she quickly descends the final stairs to close the distance between us. “You look gorgeous. I love the lace. It’s so you.” She smiles. “I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful.”

I blush and rub the back of my neck, stretching the lace across my shoulders. She gently takes my face and kisses me, and when she pulls away, she looks to the rest of the room.

“If everyone would like to head up to the second floor, dinner is ready,” she announces.

The promise of food gets people moving in a hurry. Some of us take the stairs, but others crowd into the elevator hidden within the central pillar and ride it up. The dining room takes up most of the second floor with the kitchen taking up the other portion. Two long tables have been set up for the banquet: one in the back of the room for us teens, a larger one in the front of the room for the parents. Tent cards mark each of our spaces, and we find our spots where special dishes wait for us. The food is just as eloquent as the atmosphere itself, and no one at my table at least hesitates to dig in.

We chat lightheartedly, avoiding any topic that would be too heavy. Even Sergei, so eager to do well tonight, restrains himself from talk of strategy. Although I try to strike up conversation with Amanda and Brad — two of Clara’s close friends who have treated me at best as an acquaintance — there’s still an obvious divide between us. Clara, Amanda, and Brad talk mostly amongst themselves. Kate, Sergei, Deval, Harry, and I talk to ourselves.

Dinner ends without ceremony, and we go downstairs to take pictures in the Jackson’s backyard. The garden in the back is much less wild than the one in the front, and it holds a mystical quality that I always mistrusted. Despite his aversion to the *Magical Negro* trope, Sergei’s father has always loved the aesthetics of fantasy and faerie gardens. That’s how it’s set up back here — beautiful expanses of miniature housing that I’m sure has housed a dark spirit or two. We make our way to the blooming rose bushes in the back for the pictures, and as the other families go first, I find my way to Sergei.

“You nervous?” he asks.

“Yeah.” I rub the lace on my arm. “You?”

He shakes his head. “I’ll survive, and I’ll get invited to apply to the AEC. I have no doubts.”

Some tough talk from a guy who looks like he’s going to be sick. He has himself sternly put together, every angle of his black suit sharp and angular. The yellow rose — plucked from his own garden, I would think — is even meticulously arranged to display itself at the most pleasing angle.

“This is our chance,” he says. “If we prove ourselves tonight... If we can make a good, unique story and stay alive, we could really make it.”

“Yeah, but those are the key words — stay alive.”

“Fair enough.” He looks down at me, towering nearly a foot above my head. “Are you prepared for what might happen?”

I look to Clara posing with Amanda.

“It’s not going to happen,” I say. “She’s going to live.”

“You looked up tonight’s featured Writer, didn’t you?” he asks. “From what I read, Crein loves tearing apart couples.”

“It’s not going to happen,” I repeat more firmly.

He waits a moment, then nods. “Okay. But we need to stick together tonight, okay? If we do that, all of our chances will be better.”

“Duh.”

Mother turns around from conversing with Harry’s mom and waves to signal it’s our turn. No monsters harass us while Mrs. Jackson takes pictures of my parents and me or Clara and

me. No freak gusts of wind reveal mysterious figures standing amongst the trees. For once, the world is calm, and I know that should scare me, but all I can do is smile.

We go inside to await the limo that will take us to the dance. While everyone else chats, Sergei and I sit aside and analyze the group. We agree that Kate, Harry, and Deval will live; Kate and Harry are in Honors Lifestyles, and Deval is in the normal course, so they've all had enough training to know how to survive tonight. Harry easily bends under pressure, though, so we agree to keep a close eye on him. He managed to restrain himself to eating only the salad provided to him at dinner, so maybe we won't need to worry. Sergei says Clara will probably live, though I know it's only because he knows better than to say otherwise in front of me. When we start debating Brad and Amanda, though, it's hard to say anything good. They're some of the most generic characters I've ever seen, and their names have practically condemned them to death. They have only their parents to thank for that (all of whom are just as boring as they are). Sergei and I decide that both of them will probably die.

The limo arrives a little past eight. We all say goodbye to our parents, but only those of us from Honors Lifestyles, who have the best grasp on the kind of horror we'll see tonight, break the social bounds and allow ourselves to be embarrassed by hugging our parents.

"Don't worry. I'm coming back," I say, using all my strength to push out the words.

Father nods mutely and Mother hugs me again before allowing me to go off. I'm the last person in the limo, so as soon as the door shuts, it begins driving away. I watch through the back window as my parents grow smaller as we drive further away, and when we turn a corner towards the school, they disappear completely from sight.

I turn back to the rest of the group, which has been excitedly chattering since I got in. The dim blue lights in the cabin cast strange shadows across their faces, exaggerating forced grins.

“Hey Brad, why don’t you break out the minibar?” Clara asks. I sit between her and Sergei, and she slides an arm around my waist.

“Totally!” says Brad, and I inwardly cringe. He kisses Amanda and then crouches his way over to the small fridge beside the edge of the seats. After a moment of rifling around, he pulls out a bottle of cheap vodka and a stack of chilled shot glasses to the cheers of most in the cabin.

“Where did you get that?” Sergei asks, voice a monotone.

“My older brother paid off the driver to slip it in here,” he says, passing around the glasses. “Gonna cost an arm and a leg to pay him back, though.”

He goes around the cabin and fills each person’s glass. Clara’s busy chatting with Amanda, so I lean in to Sergei beside me and whisper, “What’s wrong?”

He turns his head and speaks so only I can hear him. “We shouldn’t be drinking.”

I don’t notice that I’d felt any pleasure until it disappears from me completely. Of course. It’s such a simple detail, one of the first things we learn as teenagers. Alcohol just quickens the path to death. I never fall into simple traps like this, and I feel the first hint of worry about the strength of the Writers and the instinctual Fog I’ve always felt I had a strong grasp on.

I look at Clara as Brad pours her shot.

“Hey, maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” I say.

Clara’s laugh makes my heart sink. “Oh, don’t be a prude, Audrey. It’s prom! Everyone’s drinking tonight. Besides, we want to make sure Brad gets his money’s worth, right?”

She gives me no chance to retort by raising her glass and calling the attention of the party.

“To the best night of our lives!” she says.

Everyone raises a glass, so I must do the same. Our friends cheer Clara's dedication before throwing back the alcohol. I look at Sergei, and he tosses the contents over his shoulder to soak into the cracks between the leather seat and car wall. I reluctantly do the same.

We pull up to the school's gymnasium and everyone begins unloading. Clara and I are the last two left, and she grabs my hands and stares at me.

"I wasn't exaggerating earlier," she says. Her face is deadly serious. "This is going to be the best night of our lives. I promise."

She pulls me forward and kisses me until my head spins, and then she gets out. My heart beats wildly in my chest, and I gather up my courage.

It's twenty minutes after the start of prom, and when I step out of the limo, the night begins.

## Chapter 04

Half of the school's upperclassmen fill the gymnasium, which looks as though student council has spent as much of its budget as it dares on decorations. Tapestries in our school colors, silver and purple, hide the concrete walls from sight, and dark purple lanterns hover above the heads of the dancers from invisible strings. On the far side of the gym, a local band plays covers of soft alt-rock songs. Right next to the entrance sits a buffet of snacks and a few dozen tables and chairs. My gaze immediately turns to Harry, who has collected a sheen of sweat on his forehead. He starts for the food, but Kate and I grab him by the arms and hold him back.

"Oh, come on, guys," he whines. "That salad barely did anything for me."

"Don't put yourself at risk," says Kate. "Come on, you know better."

"But I'm *so* hungry."

"Yeah, I know," Kate says, "but don't think I haven't noticed that you went up a pants size since two days ago."

Deval steps up from Sergei's side, her dark hands clenched tightly at her sides.

"Leave him alone," she says. She comes forward and wrenches Harry away from Kate and me. "Jesus, what's wrong with you guys? Just let him eat."

I raise a brow and look at Sergei. He sighs and turns to his date.

"Harry is prone to *Fat Kid*. Especially in situations like these, those kids tend to eat a bunch, go off to find even more food, and end up being one of the first people to die," he says. "We just don't want that to happen to Harry, and I'm sure the Writers have been ratcheting up his hunger to try to force him into that role."

Deval opens her mouth to retort, but Harry pulls away from her and shakes his head.



“Hey, no, it’s okay. They’re right.” I feel a bit of guilt at the shame on his face. “Thanks for trying to help, though.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Kate promises. She nudges him in the ribs. “No one’s dying on my watch, bud.”

We begin commandeering a table for ourselves, but as we sit, Clara grabs me by the shoulder. She asks me to dance, and before I can answer, she snatches up my hands and drags me to the dance floor, giggling the entire time. I forget my promise to Sergei to stick with him, and while I barely keep up with Clara in my heels, I don’t fall. The strength of my smile hurts my face. Once she’s gotten me where she wants me, Clara turns and puts her hands on my waist and tries to lead me into a rhythmic sway.

“You’re really excited about prom,” I say.

She laughs, and a spotlight dances across her shoulders. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

I can’t help but be reminded of what my parents said about Clara: she’s high-risk; she’s blonde, busty, and beautiful. She’s a time bomb, and if there’s any rule in this world, it’s to stay away from girls like her.

But her body is warm against mine, and I pull her a little closer. I’ve been trying to avoid this girl for years, but when she asked me out on a frigid night in November, I couldn’t say no. She wears the same scent she wore that night — lavender.

The band goes into a slow song, and I close what little space there is between us. She leans her head on my shoulder, face turned in towards my neck.

“I’m glad I’m here with you,” she says, and I try to ignore the crooning love ballad in the background. “I should have asked you out when I first saw you.”

I smile. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because you’re beautiful and smart and a star boxer. Main character material if I’ve ever seen it.”

I laugh, my breath rustling some of her golden curls. “I’m not that great.”

“Stop being modest.” She hugs me a bit closer. Her shoulders dip, and she presses a kiss to my cheek and then my lips. “Thank you for these fun last few months. They have been great.”

My heart seizes, and I try to bring her closer.

“Don’t even talk like that,” I whisper. Neither of us speaks for the rest of the song. When we finally pull away, I let her lead, and she drags me around to her friends, which apparently consists of every single body here. Being the class president and head of five different organizations in school, it makes sense that she’s popular, but I never expected it to be to *this* extent. Clara holds my hand or strokes my arm wherever we go, and she doesn’t let me stray far from her.

After an hour of socializing, I have to separate myself from her and her friends. I tell her my feet hurt and I’ll be at our table, and she lets me wander away while she chats with some people from French club. Sergei, Kate, and Harry sit at a table near the exit. Everyone but Sergei wears a nervous expression.

“Hey,” I say, sitting down next to Kate. “What’s wrong? You look like death.”

“Deval went to the bathroom half an hour ago,” Harry says, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

“Alone?”

I look to Sergei, and he gives me a grave nod.

“Kate was supervising Harry at the buffet, making sure he didn’t grab too much,” he said.

“She and I were sitting here when she told me she needed to go to the bathroom. I asked her to

wait for you or Kate to come back to go with her, but she insisted she had to go then. I couldn't stop her."

I look over at Kate.

"We should... look for her," I say. Kate carefully wipes at a tear threatening to creep out of her eye. We both know what's probably happened to Deval, and even if we didn't know her very well, it only signals the worst for the night.

"Yeah," Kate says.

I take her hand and we stand up together. I glance towards where I last saw Clara, and she's still there, talking to the French club girls. I told her not to go anywhere alone, and I hope she'll listen to me.

"You two stick together," I say to Sergei and Harry.

They nod gravely.

"Be careful," says Sergei. Harry hides his face in his hands.

Kate and I leave the gymnasium, her hand gripping mine tightly and cutting off the circulation. The prom committee failed to decorate anything but the gym. Fliers for school clubs and grief counseling hang on the walls. Just outside the women's bathroom is a poster that says, "See something? Say nothing<sup>3</sup>." I grimace at the red eyes hanging beneath it. It's hard to tell sometimes whether the school wants us to live or creep the hell out of us.

Kate and I halt when we reach the stalls. All of the doors are closed, and the fluorescent lights above us flicker. From beneath the stall at the end, a dark liquid creeps across the lilac linoleum.

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<sup>3</sup>Reference to common saying and also to the popular Horror/Comedy podcast, *Welcome to Night Vale*, which has the phrase, "See something? Say nothing and drink to forget."

“Fuck,” Kate whispers. She swipes a hand over her ear and smears one of the painted flowers there.

“Do you think it’d be better for us to look or ignore?” I ask, pulling at the gold lace sleeves of my dress.

“That depends: do we want to make a good story or try to defuse it completely?”

I press my lips together, watching the puddle of what is surely blood creep closer to us.

“It’s prom,” I say. “I don’t think we can defuse it.”

She sighs and echoes one of Mr. Ingram’s sayings. “Confront with calm?”

“Confront with calm.”

We have to put the story into action or else something worse will happen, but if we do it with a calm demeanor, then at least we can set ourselves up as cool protagonists rather than terrified potential victims.

“Be prepared in case she’s zombified,” I say, and Kate nods.

We keep our hands locked together as we creep towards the last stall. I try to remember what Jonathan Crein’s style is, but all I can remember from the article I read was how he loves tragic female characters. I think of my dance with Clara, her seeming last words. I bite my tongue to keep the bile in my stomach.

The blood stains Kate’s white flats red. We each press our free hand to the stall door and look at each other, mouthing a countdown until we push it open. Kate starts beside me, and I pull her closer. As we thought, Deval is dead. Metal spears jut out of the ground, impaling her torso and lifting her a foot off the ground. Her head hangs back with the arch of her spine so that we can’t see her face, but we only have a couple of Indian girls in our school and the sari-styled dress looks the same as hers.

"I'm sorry," Kate whispers, a steadiness in her voice that doesn't communicate to her sweating palm.

"Let's go tell the others. I'll keep an eye out to make sure she doesn't crawl after us."

We leave slowly, tracking blood along our path. No one in the gymnasium seems any the wiser that a classmate has already died. As we head back to the table, my eyes search for a clock to tell me what time it is, but they're either hidden or gone.

Sergei and Harry look up at us eagerly, but Sergei's eyes flicker down to our stained feet and the hope dies from his eyes.

"You found her," he says.

"I'm sorry," Kate says.

"It's not your fault."

She nods, but I can tell she's on the verge of crying. I sit her down next to Harry and squeeze her shoulder. My clutch sits in a pile with the other girls', and it's right next to Deval's. I pull my phone to check the time, and I can't believe it's only nine-thirty.

"It will only get worse from here," I say. "Should we bother trying to leave?"

"Won't hurt to try," says Kate.

After gathering our bags, we begin heading towards the exit, but I stop abruptly.

"I have to get Clara!"

I turn around to look for her, but the gymnasium grew more crowded in the brief time Kate and I were gone. Writhing bodies fill the dance floor, and a horde surrounds the buffet table. Even the wallflowers have hardly any room to stand apart from the crowds and look mysterious.

"You're not going to be able to find her without risking yourself," says Sergei.

“Well I’m not leaving without her.” I lift my foot to head into the crowd and start searching, but he grabs my arm and pulls me back. “Let’s just try the door. If it looks like we’ll be able to leave, I’ll go with you to find her. Okay?”

He forces me to look him in the eye, and after a long moment, I nod. The four of us push our way towards the exit, and when we get there, Harry and Sergei work together to try and open it.

“An emergency exit that won’t even budge,” Harry says after the third time they try ramming it open. “How the hell is that safe?”

“It’s not. That’s the point,” says Sergei, and he backs away from it. “How did Deval die?”

“Impaled on spikes that came out of the ground,” Kate says. “No idea where they came from.”

“So we’re probably going to be dealing with something supernatural.”

“We might be able to find another exit if we leave the gym,” offers Harry.

I shake my head. “If this one’s locked, they’ll all be locked — at least until dawn<sup>4</sup>.”

We’re given no more time to think. The music fades out, and spotlights shine on the stage. A man and women stand there. I’ve never seen either and they’re certainly too old to be students, but both are blonde, white, and conventionally attractive. Their smiles stretch their faces too big.

“Welcome, everyone, and thank you for joining us tonight,” says the young woman. Her voice is sickly sweet and demands quiet from the crowd. “Tonight is a very special night for everyone.”

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<sup>4</sup>Many survival-horror video games and films rely on a trope where one needs to survive until dawn/the early morning while being trapped somewhere. This also specifically references the popular survival-horror game *Until Dawn*.

The crowd whispers. From what I can hear, no one else recognizes the two emcees either.

“It sure is, Janet,” says the man through his grin. Neither of them has blinked since they began talking. “Tonight, we are going to celebrate our wonderful students and faculty. You’ve all done very well this year, and you’ve had so many wonderful memories.”

“And now we want to announce the prom king and queen, the best our school has to offer,” says Janet. “Is everyone ready to hear the announcement?”

The crowd remains quiet, and Janet’s smile tightens.

“Is everyone ready to hear the announcement?” she repeats, and this time the lights flicker and the floor gives a shake that rattles the entire crowd into a nervous cheer.

“Much better,” Janet says, smoothing back her oversized bun. “Then allow me to introduce this year’s queen, Clara Daniels!”

My heart seizes in my chest. The crowd gives another nervous applause, and my eyes search desperately for her. It doesn’t take long. A spotlight illuminates her in the crowd as she makes her way on stage. She stands next to the young man, obviously a little nervous with just the smallest, shaky smile on her face.

“John, would you like to announce our prom king?” asks Janet.

“I sure would, Janet!” says the male emcee. “Our prom king is, well, it’s a bit of a shock — actually *another* queen.” He gives a saccharine laugh. “And she is Audrey Ericson!”

Chapter 05

A spotlight blinds me, and I put up a hand to block it. There are too many emotions in me, too much conflict for me to be able to do anything but wander dumbly towards the stage. Someone grabs my arm to stop me, but I pull out of their grasp. I can't run from this.

When I stand next to Clara on stage, I find the crowd looking up at us grow terrifying. One by one, I see grins spread across faces, those same too-big smiles donned by the night's hosts. I try to remember a decade's worth of training. I had never thought it would be me here, standing as the main character of a story — for surely that's what this means. I am literally in the spotlight, and my hands are sweating, but Clara holds one of them. Her smile — nervous, shaky — contrasts too sharply with our hosts' — conniving, sinister. All I can do is squeeze her hand and keep quiet until I know what we're dealing with.

"Beautiful," John purrs. "Who would have thought that such an unusual couple could be honored by this school in such a way?"

Janet grins. "Certainly not me, John."

Clara and I stand between the two hosts, and they turn in unison to look at us. Their faces look like they're made of plastic. I scoot closer to Clara and grab her hand. Those in the crowd with the huge grins awe at us. The other students just look petrified. I try to find Sergei and the others, but the far back of the gymnasium is too dark to see.

Janet says, "Before we crown our prom queen and *queen*, we're first going to have a little quiz."

The smiling audience gives a theatrical sigh.

"Don't worry," John laughs. "We promise it's going to be a lot of fun."



Chains appear beneath me and slam up to wrap around my wrists. Snaked around me, they pull down and force me onto my knees while my clutch flies backwards out of my hand. I release a cry of pain and shock, and another set of chains grabs Clara and drags her down as well. They pull us just far enough apart that we can't touch hands.

"What's going on?" Clara asks. "What is this?"

"Shut up," I hiss. "Don't you know not to ask those questions?"

"Looks like we have a lover's quarrel," chuckles John. "Don't worry, *both* of you will have a chance to win your crown, but be warned — if you fail, you might not like the outcome

"First question goes to Clara: who is Audrey's best friend?"

She blinks, pulling slightly against the rust-coated chains tethering her to the ground.

"What does this have to do with anything?" she asks. "This is insane. Let us go!"

He sighs. "Oh, I'm sorry, that's *not* the correct answer."

A spike of metal shoots up from the ground next to Clara and spears through her leg. As some of her blood spurts on to me, she screams. I bite back my own wails.

"Maybe Miss Audrey can do better," says Janet. "Which of the following words have you used to describe Clara: A, stupid; B, arrogant; C, ugly; or D, all of the above?"

My eyes widen, and the absurdity of the situation somehow brings a wave of clarity.

"I see what this is," I say blandly. "D. All of the above."

Clara is pulled from her pain-induced tears for a moment to look at me with wide, hurt eyes.

"You really said those things?"

I look back at the audience. Half of them are grinning now. There's no time to explain how these are just pulled out of context, how some of them were said when she wasn't even around and never meant for her to hear.

"Just play the game, Clara."

"This is stupid. This is *crazy*. Leave us alone!"

"Clara, you next question—"

A shout from the crowd cuts off John.

"Excuse me." I watch someone push their way to the front of the crowd, and upon reaching the stage, the figure is revealed to be Sergei. "Could you explain the rules of this trivia round, please?"

I snap my head sideways to look at John, who still smiles despite the strain around his eyes.

"O-of course," he says. "Each person will have to answer ten personal questions about the other or herself. However, if she gets three questions wrong, she will die and, unfortunately, lose her crown."

Clara gasps. Blood soaks through the bottom of her gown from where her leg is pierced.

Sergei grimaces. "Okay, but see, I was *really* looking forward to becoming prom king. Is there any way I can join the trivia?"

"You weren't nominated, so you can't play," says Janet. "Now, Clara, your second question is—"

"Isn't that kind of sexist?" Sergei asks. When I look at the hosts, they can barely hold together their smiles. "I meant, how come two girls get to play but not a guy? It's prom *king* for a

reason, you know. And they're both white? I know there aren't a lot of people of color at this school, but you could at least *try* to show a little more diversity."

Someone farther back in the crowd shouts, "Yeah!" and it sounds suspiciously like Kate.

"That's just the way it turned out," says Janet. "*Clara*, your question is 'how many times have you fantasized about' — excuse me, sir!"

Sergei climbs onto the stage and rips the microphone from Janet's hands.

"No music, no background dancers, nothing. How did *you two* get picked to emcee when you barely know what you're doing? Leave it to white people to host lame-ass parties." Sergei turns to the crowd and yells, "Now, how is Quiet Knoll High doing tonight?"

The crowd cheers weakly. The grinning people in the audience look vaguely uncomfortable.

"Wow that sounded bad. Let's try that again: *how is Q-K high doing tonight?*"

The cheer goes up a bit louder this time.

"That's better. Now, does anyone actually want to watch this boring quiz show, or do we want to see some action?"

The holler from the crowd is mostly the boys of the school, and I grimace. I look over at Clara, and utter confusion paints her face.

"Let's try this, then: Audrey, you're a star athlete right? And Clara looks *just* like a princess right now. John, Janet, why don't you two hide our princess somewhere in the school, and we're going to send Audrey on a hunt to find her. She'll have to solve puzzles and fight her way through, but should she reach Clara before dawn, then Clara is saved and they both get to walk on home with their crowned heads held high. If she fails to find her, then you can feed Clara to whatever beasts you have lying around, and Audrey can live in pain and sorrow forever.

I'm sure you could even set up some cameras around the school so everyone can watch their journey." Sergei turns to the crowd. "Sounds like a lot more fun than just sitting there listening to them answer questions, huh?"

The crowd gives a hearty cheer, everyone joining in.

"Well, you know what everyone else thinks." Sergei turns back to Janet and shoves the microphone into her hand. "Now, what are *you* going to decide?"

I would have kissed Sergei. How fucking brilliant he is to turn the story on them. Change the situation into one where Clara isn't responsible for her own survival — which means that she can't fuck it up with her lack of training. John and Janet look at each other through their strained grins, but they must know that they don't have a choice here. Sergei changed the narrative, and now John and Janet — not real humans, I think, probably just created by Crein for this situation — have to follow or risk jeopardizing the flow of the story completely. Whatever they decide, the mood has been thrown off.

"I guess... that sounds... great," says Janet. A dark shadow forms beneath Clara, and the chains drag her into it. Her screams echo throughout the room before the shadow closes up. "All hidden in your special place<sup>5</sup>. You have only eight hours until sunrise, Audrey. You better hurry."

Janet, John, and all the smiling members of the crowd melt into the ground and disappear. The chains around my wrists vanish, and I quickly stand up and wrap my arms around Sergei.

"Thank you," I breathe. He nods and hugs me back. I pull away after a moment and try to let my heart calm down. "Where the hell are we going to find Clara, though?"

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<sup>5</sup>Reference to the popular survival horror video game, *Silent Hill 2*, in which James' dead wife writes to him and says she'll be waiting in their "special place."

“We’re not,” Sergei says. The crowd-schmoozing grin he’d plastered on his face fades, replaced with his usual expression of stoic indifference. “You’re going home now.”

The audience has started talking amongst itself, but two people have come forward and climbed onto the stage. Kate and Harry join us and squeeze me with quick hugs. I barely register them.

“Excuse you?” I ask, glaring at Sergei. “I’m not leaving here without Clara.”

“It’s the only way you’re going to get out.” Sergei’s nostrils flare, a rare expression of anger. “You read about Crein. You know that if you follow through with this, it’s not going to end well. One or both of you will end up dead — no exceptions.”

“I can’t leave her to die.”

“She would have died anyway.” He gestured behind me. “You saw her up here, didn’t you? She would have gotten herself killed in that game, and you know it. But just because I got her life prolonged by a couple of hours doesn’t mean that her fate’s not going to end up the same as it was before.”

Hot tears fill my eyes, and I ball my fists up at my side. I try to think of some kind of retort, but all that comes into my head are insults I could throw at him. Before I can say anything I’ll regret, Harry puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Assuming she *could* leave—” he says.

Sergei quickly tacks on, “And because it’d be tragic and filled with guilt, she certainly could.”

“Assuming she *did* leave, what do you think would happen? The most obvious way for that story to go would be for Clara to become consumed by hatred and bitterness because Audrey

didn't look for her, and then haunt her afterward. Can you imagine the kind of psychological trauma that would inflict on her? Is that the kind of life you want for her?"

"I'd rather her be alive than dead."

I push Harry away and take a few steps from my friends, my hands in my hair. I know in my bones that there is no way to save Clara. Her heart is too kind, and her story too beautiful. The only way it can end is in villainy or death.

"I have to try," I say, turning back to them. "This — this thing with those smiling freaks and Clara — this is my story. I have to choose what happens. And it's not up to you — any of you — to make that decision for me." I look to Sergei. "I appreciate you sticking your neck out for me, but I've got to do this alone from here on out."

"Would you listen to yourself?" he snaps. "You're playing right into the tropes. Nothing good is going to come out of your going after her."

"Nothing good is going to come out of this, *period*," I say, "but at least I can make the best situation possible. Look at this way, Sergei: once I leave, a new Writer will probably take over this room and create a different story. You'll get a chance to impress the Writers and you might be a protagonist instead of a sidekick for once. Don't you want that?"

Lines of anger etched into his stony face, Sergei looks away and says nothing.

I say, "The best thing you guys can do is ignore the situation. That will stop you from being involved. Don't follow me; Crein will just use you for his body count and make my life worse. If he somehow drags you into it, do what you can to survive with silly. It'll completely ruin his tone."

I turn to Harry and wrap him in a hug, then Kate. I expect Sergei to ignore me, but he hugs me back, squeezing me tightly.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” he says. “By the flag pole. You better be there.”

“Stay smart,” Kate says.

Harry tries to say something, but tears fill his eyes and he shakes his head.

“See you later,” I say. I take the stairs down from the stage, and the sea of students parts to allow me access to the doors leading to the rest of the school. When I reach I reach them, I breathe deeply before pushing through to the other side.

## Chapter 06

The hallway is empty. It looks the same as earlier when Kate and I went to look for Deval, and the hum of the fluorescent lights above me is the only sound here. Even the chatter of the gymnasium has disappeared. Looking forward, I see the door at the end of the hall leading to the west wing of the school. Wherever Clara is, she'll be in the last place I would look. This isn't anything like the prom movies I watched with my parents, and it's not like *Jaybird*, either. Silent and alone, I try to think of where our special place could be.

Room 303, where Clara and I first met in homeroom last year.

The music room, where I asked Clara out for the first time and where we had our first kiss.

But of course, it could also be somewhere to conjure up a darker memory, but I'm unable to bring up any of those memories. If the questions they were asking us during the quiz show are any indicator, that's where she'll be. But Crein is looking for a good story, and if I deliver, he might spare her a horrendous death. I head to the doors leading to the west wing and push them open...

Only to come out through the gym doors that had brought me into the east wing, the west wing doors looking a littler farther away than they had last time.

"Oh, come on," I grumble. Of all the tropes to become popular, *this* was the most annoying.<sup>6</sup>

I'm stuck in the east wing, and however many times I go through the door at the other end of the hallway, I'll end up back here. I begin on the right side of the hall, checking every

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<sup>6</sup>The trope of paradoxical spaces and looping hallways/environments has become extremely popular in recent video games. It was most famously used in the demo *P.T.*, now considered to be one of the scariest video games of all time, but it has also been used in many other media such as the novel *House of Leaves* by Danielewski and the movie *The Matrix*.



classroom door. The third room I try is unlocked, and it's a classroom I've never been in before. I try the light switch next to the door, but nothing happens. However, the full moon shines through the window, and its light illuminates the teacher's desk in the corner. I make my way over confidently, knowing that the scary stuff won't happen until the second or third room. Crein has to build up the tension, after all.

My eyes adjust enough to be able to read the nameplate on the desk: Mrs. Carter. The name pricks a memory inside of me, and I realize this is Clara's honors English teacher. The only other objects on the desk are a lamp (broken), a flashlight (working), and a piece of paper that looks as though it's been ripped out of a journal.

I use the flashlight to shine a light on the paper and read it:

*September 5*

*I wrote about a girl last year. Do you remember her? She has an old lady name. I met her a couple of times last year at some sports events. She's a boxer, and when she made it in the state championships, I had to interview her so I could write about it in the school newspaper. It was such a big deal, I had thought the editor-in-chief would do it, but apparently he thought the class president would be able to connect with her better.*

*It was very flirty, but nothing happened between us. We only saw each other a couple of times, but I can't deny I haven't thought about her since then. Anyway, the reason I'm bringing it up is that we finally have a class other than homeroom together — calculus.*

*It's only been a week since classes started, but I feel like I'm falling in love. She's just so beautiful and witty and cool, and she keeps coming over to me after class and talking me up.*

*She's bad at calc — I don't know how she got into the honors section, really, but I also think she likes me and is using it as an excuse to talk. It's cute.*

“You’re not going to do a single original thing, are you?” I ask, setting the diary page back on the desk. At least now I can be pretty sure what media this script is for. Looping hallways and hunting randomly placed diary pages — couldn’t be anything but a video game.

My ears pick up some faint sound — a quiet orchestra playing out lazy notes accented with creaks and wails. The game has really begun if the soundtrack has kicked in. I turn on the flashlight and use it to guide my way back to the door.

There’s something off about the east wing of the school when I come back into the hall. I can’t name it. I can only feel it. It’s as though the lines and angles of the world now bend a few degrees in the wrong direction. I shiver and breathe.

“Okay, I guess I spoke too soon. This is a little spooky.”

I double back to check the doors that had been previously locked and then the doors to the gym. None of them budge. I turn around to face the far end of the hall. The light in front of the door to the west wing flickers, momentarily revealing the obscure form of a woman in a long gown. My heart leaps, thinking it may be Clara, but when the light turns off and I shine my flashlight, no one is there.

“Get yourself together, Audrey,” I tell myself. “That was obviously a monster.”

I wish *my* monster was here. I bet it could help me.

I try the west wing door again, and while it doesn’t take me to the west wing, it *does* take me through the stairway doors on the third floor that lead into that hall. The strange perspective of skewed angles remains here, but the fluorescent overhead lights are either off or burned out. I

slide the beam of my flashlight over the room's edges and see unlit candles lining the walls. I take a slow step forward, and as soon as my foot hits the ground, the candles on either side of me light up and cast strange shadows on the walls. My heart beats fast in my chest, and I keep my flashlight trained forward, ready to catch whatever monster will inevitably jump out at me. Luckily, the door to homeroom is the second door on my right, so I slip in as calmly as I can, ignoring the sense of fear that the self-lighting candles fill me with.

There are only two desks in this room. Not even the teacher's remains. In the far back corner, next to the window, sits the desk I used in homeroom at the beginning of the year. Nearly dead center is Clara's. Once again, the moon casts light onto what I need to be looking for; a note sits on Clara's desk, my own desk in shadow. I scan the room before going to Clara's desk. Finding no obvious threat, I pick the note up.

I jump back. My desk in the corner screeches across the ground and slams into Clara's. It forces a yell out of me, but I nearly trip on my dress and heels when I try to back up. Cursing, I press a hand to my chest and gather myself. There seems to be no overt threat; the desk was just a jump-scare<sup>7</sup>. I take a deep breath and read the diary page.

She's writing about the first day we spent all of homeroom chatting. After that, I began sitting next to her rather than in my usual corner spot. The kind, loving words make me smile.

When I set the note down, a distant wail goes up somewhere in the hall. It sounds like a person crying. There's nowhere to hide, so I don't bother trying. It's probably a tension-builder, nothing more. But I'll definitely need to keep an eye out from now on. I start to leave, then pause at the door. I nearly trip over my own dress, so I kick off my heels and rip at the bottom of my dress. The muscles in my shoulder bulge when I bend over, and I feel the lace covering them rip

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<sup>7</sup>Many horror games have nonsensical "jump scares" meant only to startle the player. They usually have little to no explanation for them.

apart. A chuckle slips through me, but I focus on tearing apart my skirt until I'm exposed beneath the knee. I'd still rather be in my boxing gear or even my pajamas, but this will work for now. If a fight is coming, I can take it.

I switch to holding my flashlight in my left hand, and in my right hand I wield one of my heels like a weapon. I kick open the classroom door. The wailing stops immediately. To my left, the candles remain lit. Darkness engulfs the right. If Crein's any good as a writer, he won't put two jump-scares back to back, but I'm still spooked. I immediately want to be silly, to defuse the situation. Writers can't make you do anything, but they can ratchet up your emotions, and my fear is through the roof. I almost always try being silly, but I'm even afraid of doing that. If I want Crein to spare Clara, I have to play by his rules. I have to appease him. I steady myself and grit my teeth.

The candles continue to light my steps. By the time I reach the doors leading into the other stairway, the entire room is lit and I'm shaking a little less. I kick this door open, too, and when I shine my flashlight at the other end of the hallway, I see the form of a woman again. It twitches and turns towards me suddenly. It's nearly a double of Clara, wearing her same dress, hair curled in the same way. Except it's definitely not her. The wailing<sup>8</sup> I'd heard before intensifies, and the monster falls to its hands and knees sprints towards me. I feel like I'm about to scream, but I force myself into a fighting stance with my flashlight trained on it and my heel ready to tear into some flesh.

When it gets close enough, I see why its face disturbed me so much from a distance; its eyes are gone. While the rest of its body remains normal, its eyes are just two bloody holes. It scrambles forward a few more feet before it's in range, and I punch it right in its empty eye sockets. It screeches, and I hit it again, this time swinging my heel so that it catches in one of the

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<sup>8</sup>Reference to the *witch* enemy in the survival-horror game *Left 4 Dead*.

sockets. Blood splatters across my face, and I punch it in the stomach to send it to the ground. Three more kicks, and it's dead.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead and look back down at it. Its eyes have returned; it looks just like Clara, only bruised and broken on the floor. My breath catches, and I force myself to keep still and close my eyes.

"It's not her," I say to myself. "It's meant to upset you."

When I open my eyes, the Clara monster has disappeared, and there's only another diary page there. I pick it up and read it. I expect it to be another one of our memories, but I'm barely mentioned.

*November 23*

*I finally told Amanda, Brad, and Jimmy about me and Audrey. They didn't take it well, Jimmy especially. He just went out of his mind, screaming at me, calling me a whore and a stupid bitch and a whole host of other names before he stormed out of the restaurant. Once he'd left, Brad told me Jimmy's had a crush on me for three years. I had no idea, but after that, I'm glad I never went out with him.*

*Still, Brad and Amanda seemed pretty chill with it... until the drive home. Amanda dropped Brad off first, but when we got to my house, she parked in my driveway and locked the doors.*

*"Clara," she said, "that was an incredibly bitchy thing for you to do back there. I can't believe you would just come out as a lesbian right in front of Jimmy. You knew he liked you."*

*Can you believe she said that to me? I told her, "No, I didn't. And I'm not a lesbian. I'm bisexual."*

*And then she said, “Whatever.” — Whatever!!!! — “Look, I’m not going to tell you how to run your life, but what you’re doing is honestly gross. Can you just not talk about it around me?”*

*Words cannot express how fucking pissed I am right now. I can’t even imagine ever talking to her again. Apparently she thinks I’m going to ruin my reputation doing this, but fuck her to be honest.*

“Who does that bitch think she is?” I turn the diary page over, expecting to find some kind of resolution, but there’s nothing. “Clara is still friends with her, too?” She always told me Amanda was thrilled for us. Apparently she lied.

My footfalls are heavy as I make my way down the hall to the stairway door. I try it, but it’s locked. I’m so angry that when I turn around and find a Clara lookalike just a few feet from my face, I don’t even scream. I just punch it. Its teeth, black and jagged, scrape open my knuckles, but I punch it again and again and again until its skull caves beneath my battering. Blood and brains stain me and my dress, and when I stand, I don’t bother wiping them off. I try the door again, and it opens.

The hallways seem endless. I find more of Clara’s diary pages and more of Lookalikes, each more disgusting than the last. Apparently after Clara’s other friends took her news of her dating me well, Amanda was forced to accept it, too. I read Clara’s description of their making up with a hint of disgust. Even if it’s portrayed as a change of heart, I know — and I’m sure Clara knows — Amanda only said it to remain in Clara and their friends’ good graces. I learn more about Jimmy, too. More than I’d ever wanted to know. Before we began dating, I saw her hanging out with him a lot, but one it stopped, I never questioned it. I would have never guessed

that they had actually been really good friends. As she documents their estrangement, she also documents the history of their friendship. It's weird seeing him depicted as someone who is vulnerable.

*Jimmy told me he's terrified. He's in Honors Lifestyles, but he's convinced he's not going to make it. His dad has started scratching at the wallpaper, and none of the techniques they taught James in class help the situation. His dad is just going more and more insane. I don't know what I can do to help him. I don't think I can.*

I try to push away any pity I feel for him and focus on how horribly he treated her after she began dating me. Any friend who throws a raging fit like that, no matter how much they claim to love you, is not worth keeping.

I kill probably two dozen Lookalikes. They don't even resemble her anymore. They're just horrifying skeletons with blonde hair and ball-gowns. After several looping hallways and rooms and hunting for keys and diary pages, I come to the art room, and everything fits together. We had our first fight in this room, just when the new semester had started. She'd met me here since I was working late on a project. She is here.

Chapter 07

The art room is a dozen times bigger than it should be. Hundreds of identical easels fill it, and behind each one stands a frozen Lookalike.

“Audrey.”

My name bounces around the room in a whisper, the source indeterminable. It sounds like Clara, but I’m afraid it’s a trap. I train my flashlight on the Lookalike closest to me. It doesn’t move or even seem to notice me. I get as close as I can, and when it still doesn’t move, I strike it with my heel. The creature disintegrates into dust.

“Audrey.”

I swing my flashlight to look at the rest of the room, each monster posed differently and all indifferent to me. Is Clara posed behind one of these easels? Or is she somewhere else entirely? It takes so much not to do anything weird or silly, not to try to expel this whole mood so I can get out of here safely, or even not to run just to get out of here faster. This room seems to go on in all directions forever, though, and I’m not sure where to go. I pick a direction and walk, keeping as far from the Lookalikes as possible as I sweep my flashlight over them. I need to be careful in case they move or one of them is actually her.

*“You’re going to die if you keep acting like this.”*

The voice startles me to a halt. I’d been walking for a couple of minutes and the voice whispering my name had phased out. But this voice isn’t ambiguous. It’s my own voice, a memory of me.

*“I’m fine. Just let me do my own thing.”*



That is Clara. There's no doubt. So my suspicions of this room were correct. I still remember this conversation we had two months ago, deciding whether or not we should go to prom in the first place.

*"Not if it's going to get you killed. Just use your brain!"* says the memory of me.

*"Use my brain? What are you trying to say? That I'm stupid?"* says the memory of Clara.

I try to tune out the old conversation, but even as I fight it, it becomes louder in my ears.

*"I'm saying that you're not thinking. I know you're capable of doing this. You're posed to be valedictorian. Literally the only thing keeping you back is your Lifestyles grade. It's like you don't even try."*

*"Not everyone is as great as you are at subversion, Audrey. Just because you can do it—"*

*"Anyone can do it."*

*"No, they can't."*

Even now, months later, the bitterness and hurt in Clara's voice pains me.

*"How can you live like this? Do you want to die? Do you want to be just some stupid blonde extra in someone else's story?"*

*"Like yours?"*

I had thought this memory would be easier to deal with. We made up after this, obviously. But try as I might, I can't recall that scene. All that exists in this place is this fight and hurt.

*"Stop it. Don't make it like that."*

A light flickers on to the right, somewhere far in the distance. Could it be guiding me? I have to chance it. I don't know how much time has already passed — my eyes hurt, but I don't know if it's from exhaustion or holding back tears. It could be close to dawn, but there's no way to tell. This strange space has no windows. I head towards the light. It's farther than I imagined, and as I grow closer, the Lookalikes begin taking on more realistic forms. More and more they begin to resemble her again, no longer the stalking skeletons I fought earlier.

*"That's what you said, though. I'm just using your own words."*

*"Why are you trying to make it such a bad thing that I don't want you to die?"*

*"Because you don't understand. Okay? For you, it's easy to suppress the Fog. You can take stock of yourself and go, 'Oh, that sudden stupidity I feel. That's the Fog trying to get me to do something plot-important.' But I can't do that. I can't tell the difference between my emotions and the Fog. It's all the same to me. Hell, as far as I know, I don't even actually love you. The Fog has just tricked me into thinking I do."*

I can see where the spotlight hits the ground; it centers on an easel with a Lookalike behind it. My legs beg me to run, but I'm too nervous, so I only speed up my pace slightly.

"Clara?" I call out, hoping that my voice will break the pain of the memory.

Turning, the Lookalikes move in unison. Their shifting bodies sound like an army changing position, and I watch as they all move to stand with their arms hanging at their sides and look at me. I hold my breath. I obviously did the wrong thing.

"Audrey?" Any fear disappears immediately as I look towards the spotlight. With all of the Lookalikes moved, I can see the easel the spotlight points to, and though I can't see her, I can see the bottom of Clara's dress. "Oh, God, please help me. Please, Audrey."

“I’m coming,” I say, but when I step forward, all of the Lookalikes step with me, toward me.

I suck in a breath. At least this feels like final boss<sup>9</sup> type stuff. I take as much stock of the situation as I can without moving. Maybe Crein will be pleased if I make this a good fight. If I go through with all of this, make it look good, then he’ll let Clara live. I have to hold on to that possibility. I let the heel and flashlight drop from my hand. As the flashlight rolls, it illuminates the rows and rows of Lookalikes turned toward me. This will take a while.

Maybe a witty line would be good here?

“All right, you fake bitches. Let’s get it on.”

Okay, it wasn’t the best. But at least it gets the ball rolling. The first Lookalike lunges towards me, and we begin fighting in earnest. A single punch disintegrates a monster, but that’s only somewhat helpful when you’ve gotta kill maybe a million of them. I lose myself in fighting them, knowing nothing but the blood and the dust of these creatures disappearing beneath my attacks. They don’t lurch as they did earlier. These ones move slowly, throwing themselves at me deliberately and violently. They move with nails and teeth and knees and elbows, every body part a weapon. With them swarmed around me, I can’t fend off every attack. Even as one is destroyed, another rips into my dress, my back, catches a finger in my flesh until I’m too slippery with my own blood for any of them to get a good grip.

They just keep coming. My body aches like it never has before, and I wonder how much longer I can stand to do this. Am I really supposed to survive this? Exhausted grunts accompany my punches now, and my entire body burns from the exertion. My eyes dart over to the spotlight. The mass of bodies between it and me does not seem to have lessened. I need a change of tactic.

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<sup>9</sup>Term used to denote the last enemy you have to fight in a video game.

Before I can lose my nerve (or the energy to move), I rush towards the light, swinging my limbs wildly to hit anything in my path. They crumble before me, and the ones that follow are too slow to catch me. The crowd of monsters thins as I grow closer until nothing but empty space remains between me and the highlighted easel. I call Clara's name, but she does not respond, so I run even faster. I round the corner of the easel and freeze.

This Clara has her eyes. She has her flesh and her skin and her hair and her dress. A pool of blood sits beneath her, and she stands frozen with a single hand raised, ready to bare down a paintbrush onto a painting. Her eyes turn to me, and I watch them soften. The words can barely escape from her mouth, which moves only slightly to form her words.

"Thank god, Audrey."

"Don't worry." I tell her. "I'm going to get us out of here."

I glance behind me, and the Lookalikes are still lumbering towards us, trying to catch up with us.

"I'm going to carry you," I tell her. "You can't move, right?"

Before she has a single word out of her lips, I crouch down so I can scoop her up into my arms like a bride. I don't even register her protests until it's too late. The moment my hands press her dress into her legs, my other hand on her back, she crumbles like ash between my fingers. I watch in stunned silence as her body disappears, turning into ripped diary pages lying at my feet.

I shake my head. The art room shrinks around me, returning to its normal size, the regular easels filling the aisles. The Lookalikes disappear. The windows form and dawn shines through them to illuminate the empty classroom. I pick a diary page at random and read it. Reading a few lines tells me it's one I've already seen. I toss it aside and grab another one.

I've read it.

Another.

Read.

Another.

Read.

I go through the pages, tears blurring my vision so it becomes hard to distinguish the words on the pages. I whisper frantically to myself, trying to convince myself it isn't true. It's dawn, but she can't be gone. I did everything right. I played Crein's game. I made a good story, so how could this have happened?

I exhaust every page and finally raise my eyes to the canvas on which she'd been painting. It is the only remainder of the world before the dawn, of that supernatural space that only I experienced — only I and Clara. She had been painting — or forced to paint — a monochrome portrait of me in red, the consistency of the medium too thick and gelatinous to be anything but blood. It's beautiful but horrifying, my hair painted like a halo of flame around me.

What is it supposed to be? A symbol? Crein loves his motifs, so maybe it was supposed to be a reflection of me after seeing only distortions of Clara? I can't think about it too long with growing angry. What was even the point of this? Why'd I even go through with all of this?

The pain of my wounds hit me all at once. I press a hand to my shoulder and find it bloodied. I look up at the painting of myself and notice one of the corners still needs shaded. I look at my hand, smeared with my own blood, and raise it to the canvas. I fill in the spots of white, drowning it in red. Once complete, I step away, and the portrait glows. The blood pours off of it, dripping to the floor, creating a new diary page. My body heals, the sore bones and open wounds mending themselves. I am left with no pain, only exhaustion, and still covered in my own blood. I crouch down to retrieve the newly formed diary page.

*April 22*

*Prom is tomorrow. I guess this will be my last entry. I've been trying to be as light-hearted about this as I can be, but it's hard when your girlfriend is constantly telling you how dangerous it's going to be. I never expected to live through high school, but I always acted like I would. I'm sort of regretting those all-nighters I pulled with papers and projects. I probably could have spent that time a little better.*

*Honestly, I'm surprised I made it this long. I'm so scared of so many things. I'm constantly jumping at everything, and if I didn't have Audrey, I'm sure I would have died last Halloween or any other night this semester. She's right. I am stupid when it comes to this stuff.*

*I might not die tomorrow, of course. That's always an option. But I can just feel something inside of me, you know? It's like the Fog is trying to tap into my instincts and tell me to settle my business before it's too late. But I'm a coward when it comes to that, too. I can't tell anyone how I really feel. I can't tell Amanda that I still feel betrayed by her for how she reacted when I told her about Audrey and me. I can't yell at Jimmy for being such an asshole ever since then. I can't even tell Audrey that she hurt my feelings so much when we fought after school that one time.*

*I hope I stay dead. I don't want to come back as something horrible to haunt Audrey. I know I just said that she hurt my feelings a lot the other month, but I know that if I just talked to her, she'd apologize and feel bad about it. I just... I don't know. I guess I'm scared to talk about it anyway.*

*Despite everything, I still love her.*

When I ball up the page in my hand, I start when I see Clara's face beneath my hands. She lays silent and motionless there, paler than I've ever seen her. I cautiously press a hand to her cheek. It's too cold.

"You're not stupid," I whisper. "I never thought you were stupid."

Slowly, slowly, I gather her up in my arms, pulling her stiff body into an embrace. She looks doll-like, as if she had never been hurt. If it weren't for her stillness and paleness, I would think she was only sleeping. But when I press my face into the crown of her head, she smells like death.

I thought I would be too hurt and weak to pick her up, but she couldn't be lighter. She lays easily in my arms, and I'm finally holding her bridal-style, just like I'd planned. Just how I was going to rescue her.

I stumble toward the art room door, and it opens in front of me. All of the smiling students are there, lining the walls, and Janet and John are there to greet me.

"Sadly defeated, our heroine emerges from her journey," says Janet, her voice morose but grin still painted on.

"To think she never got to hold her like this when Clara was still alive," says John.

"If only Audrey had been a second faster, she could have saved her beloved."

Their words might haunt me later, but now I can barely hear them. None of the people in this hall are people I know, none are students from the school. They're just set-pieces to make the room a little creepier, and I ignore them. I focus only on the crushed paper clutched in my right hand, and Clara's weight in my arms. In the next hall, the school is empty. I wander to the entrance of the school, and back into the doors to push them open. The sun greets me with rays of dawn light.

On top of his car in the parking lot sits Sergei, a cigarette tucked between his teeth. He sees me, pitches his cig, and rushes over. He tries to take Clara from me, but I won't release my grip on her. I can't.

"Let's just take her to the hospital," I say.

Sergei opens the door to the backseat for me, and I climb in with Clara on top of me. I can't let go. Sergei doesn't say anything, and he drives me to the hospital. I tell them she died at prom. They ask for cause of death. I don't know what to say — everything that comes to mind is too cheesy or stupid to say.

Eventually, I tell them, "A Writer killed her." That's enough for them.



**Author's Note:**

Here again to remind you that this is where my revisions ended. If you see any inconsistencies with name or plot points referenced, please point those out so I can fix them when I'm able to revise these next chapters.

PART 02

Chapter 08

The hospital will contact Clara's parents, so Sergei drives me home. I don't start crying until Father hugs me. He and Mother don't mind that I'm covered in blood — at least, they don't mind that it gets on them when they hold me. Sergei is still there when I go to the shower, presumably waiting for me to leave so that he can tell my parents what happened. The blood turns the bottom of the tub pink. There's so much of it. I scrub my skin raw trying to get rid of its imprint, and I'm the same color as the water when I finally turn off the faucet.

A lump sits atop my bed, and I nearly drop my towel when I see it. My muscles bunch, tired but ready to keep fighting, but when the lump pokes its head up, I release a sigh. It's just my monster. It holds its wide mouth open in a grotesque smile, and when I ignore it, I feel its disappointment dampen the room. I change into pajamas, and though I occasionally catch Sergei's voice coming from downstairs, I stay in my room. I pull back the covers and curl underneath them, my monster nesting in the crook of my knees. I stare at the far wall, at the window where Clara used the lattice to sneak in and out of my bedroom, and I try as long as I can not to fall asleep.

It's still daytime when I wake up. The sky I see through my window is gray and painted with thundering clouds. I sit up as though pulled by marionette strings and rub the sleep from my eyes. I had hoped that I would have had some kind of dream of Clara, even a nightmare, but there was nothing. I had hoped that upon waking I would be fooled for a few seconds into thinking she still lived, but the fact of her death is as prominent as ever.

“Morning,” I mumble through my sleep. My monster lays curled at the foot of my bed, and I rub its slick, oil-black head. “You still haven’t disappeared. Guess you really will be staying with us for a while.”

It snaps at my hand, drawing a prick of blood, and rolls away, trying to continue sleeping. I suck on the small wound, then cover it slightly with the blankets and rise. After washing up in the bathroom, I come out and see the door to the guest bedroom beside mine ajar, and through the sliver of an opening, I see Sergei sprawled out on the bed, asleep.

The moment I push the door open, he jumps awake. He turns in bed to look at me, then his body relaxes as he sits up. He must have gone home at some point; he’s no longer in his tux, and in fact is more casually dressed than I’m used to seeing him — just sweats and a tee-shirt.

“Why aren’t you at home?” I ask, leaning against the door frame.

He shrugs. “I was home for a few hours, but then I came here. You need someone with you.”

“Don’t your parents want to spend time with you after... that?”

“Yeah. But they understand.”

I manage a small smile.

“Thank you.”

“Are you heading back to bed?”

“Probably not.”

“Nightmares?”

“Not even,” I say. “You can keep sleeping if you want, though.”

He gets up even as I say it, stretching his long limbs. The silk wrap protecting his hair droops slightly, and he pulls it off with an easy tug.

“No way. If you’re awake, I’m awake. Those are the rules this weekend.”

I breathe a laugh. “Okay. Let me get changed at least.”

I return to my room and hear Sergei make his way to the bathroom. I plan on putting on real clothes, but when I open my closet, I find some of Clara’s clothes hanging next to mine, and the tears boil up in my eyes.

I’m full-out crying when Sergei knocks on my door, hugging one of Clara’s dresses to my chest. He comes in when I don’t immediately answer. After a moment, he sits behind me and puts an arm around me. I wipe my eyes against my shoulder.

“Let’s do something else,” I say, and he obliges.

Reluctantly, I leave the cotton sun-dress on my bed. We go downstairs, my monster on our heels. I’m surprised to see Mother and Father already up — they usually sleep in on weekends — but my eyes catch 1:04 glaring at me from the cable box, and all shock melts away. They both look up.

“Nice to see you up,” says Father, but there’s no playfully mocking tone. “Are you guys hungry?”

I nod mutely.

“I’ll get you something. Sit down. Enjoy yourselves.”

I don’t even get to the couch before Mother jumps to her feet and wraps me in an embrace. She encourages me to sit down and wraps a blanket around my shoulders, then another around Sergei’s. He thanks her with a small smile, and she presses the TV remote into his hand. The first thing to pop on is a well-timed newscast.

The grin on his the anchor’s face makes my stomach churn. He says, “Last night’s Quiet Knoll prom was—”

“Nope.” Sergei silences him with a click of a button. He tries a channel that plays only Comedy scripts — usually great for a laugh after a horrific incident, the events usually a mirror of what happened to us — but I’m not in the mood for a teen rom-com. The moment he sees a prom dress, Sergei changes the channel again.

By the time lunch is ready, we’ve only just landed on a reality home improvement show, probably the best we’re going to get. Father brings the food to us. The salmon salad with homemade vinaigrette is a good sign that he’s feeling much more up to his normal self, Fog lifted from his brain. It’s hard to enjoy it, but I eat the entire thing anyway, knowing I need the sustenance.

So our day goes — watching television, avoiding anything to do with romance or dancing or death, and keeping my mind occupied on anything but the girlfriend whose body I never even saw. As dinner time comes upon us, I put my hand on Sergei’s knee.

“I want to go see Clara’s parents,” I say.

He dons a look of sympathy. “That’s not a good idea.”

“I know, but it’s not going to be... I’ll return her clothes. I’ll tell them that I did everything I could, but it couldn’t be avoided. It’ll probably be the last time I ever go there anyway. It would be a good closing scene.”

Sergei takes a deep breath.

“Fine. We’ll go see them.”

Sergei’s car is parked in the driveway, a beat-up ‘70 Chevy that looks like it’d be better suited to the world of contemporary, pretentious young adult than the world of Horror. He climbs into the driver’s side, and I into the passenger’s, and he puts the car into reverse and drives us out. The car jerks every time he shifts gears, stuttering the throaty ballads blasting from his

speakers until it's even more annoying than usual and I shut it off. We take the rest of the drive in silence, me playing with the ends of the plastic bag that hold the few loose items of Clara's I could find around the house.

He stops next to the Daniels' mailbox, and I grab on to my adrenaline and use it to hoist myself out of the car, plastic bag cradled in my arms. The house looks dead, and there's no sound, but a light just inside one of the windows signals that someone is probably home. I ring the doorbell and wait. Less than ten seconds later, Clara's mom answers the door.

I've never seen her without makeup, and I'm surprised by the lines and wrinkles on her face. Red rims her eyes and there's a flush across her cheeks. Her saddened expression turns to one of disgust when her eyes land on me, and she tries to slam the door in my face. I catch it just in time by shoving my shoe in the door jamb.

"Leave us alone," she hisses. "We don't want anything to do with you."

"I just wanted to leave some of Clara's stuff with you guys," I say, trying to stay level-headed. "I thought you might want it."

"Put it on the porch and leave. I'll grab it when you're gone."

She tries to close the door again, but even if she's older than I am, she's not stronger, and I press my hands against the door to force it open and Mrs. Daniels to take a few steps back.

"It's not my fault," I growl. "I did everything I could."

"Then why is she dead?" she said. "What's the goddamn point of that honors class of yours if you couldn't even save one girl? What did you do wrong?"

"I was just trying to protect us."

Mrs. Daniels snorts. “She would have been better off with Jimmy, that sweet boy.” She closes her eyes and gently shakes her head. “Now get out before I call the police — and leave the bag on the porch.”

My hands shake. I want to spit on her, but instead I turn around, clutching the bag close to me like a treasure. I hear her yell behind me, “I said leave it!” and I turn around to yell obscenities at her for the rest of the walk to the car. As soon as my ass hits the seat, Sergei peels out of the neighborhood, leaving the Daniels house in the dust.

“That went well,” he says, driving away from the neighborhoods and into the inner city. “What did she say?”

“I’m the reason her daughter died,” I say, fingernails digging into my palms. “I didn’t do enough.”

“She’s mourning — both of you are,” he says. “Doesn’t give her the right to say that, but Clara was her only kid. That’s got to be hard.”

I say nothing, and he takes us back to my house. Our night is the same as our day. I let my monster sit on my lap while we watch television, play video games, or otherwise pass the time together. My monster’s teeth are sharper than I remember.

When I go to bed that night, I’m thinking of Clara, but when I wake up the next morning, my mind can only focus on Jimmy, Clara’s mom, Crein — all sources of hatred. I think of them at breakfast. When Sergei and I go on a morning run, I imagine I’m chasing Jimmy. When we eat lunch, I pretend that the chicken I stab my fork into is Mrs. Daniels’ heart. When Sergei and I play *Call of Honor*<sup>10</sup>, I envision every dead enemy as Jonathon Crein.

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<sup>10</sup> A mix of the popular First-Person Shooter games *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor*.



Sergei has to head home before dinner, and I walk him to his car. He stops when he opens the driver's side door and turns to me.

"If you need me, call me," he says. He fixes me with a hard stare, eyes the color of a void. "You'll do that, won't you?"

I give him a simple nod. He hasn't said anything about my strange mood today, but he obviously knows.

"If we both get invited, maybe we can fill out our applications for the Association of Exceptional Characters tomorrow?"

I huff. "I don't think so. You're on your own there."

"You're not going to?" Sergei is hard to surprise, so the mouth-opened look is almost amusing. "Why not?"

"I did everything right, and I didn't even get to say goodbye. Why would I want to join the club that helps those people?"

His lips form a thin, brown line. "You're not going to do something stupid, are you?"

"You know me." I flash a smile, though the set of anger remains on my brow. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He leaves reluctantly, and I watch his car drive away. Once he's out of sight, I turn around and pull my phone out of pocket. I open the web browser and search, "how to kill a Writer." There aren't many results; I didn't expect there to be. But it's a start.

Chapter 09

Clara isn't in my bed when I wake up on Monday morning. I left my bedroom window ajar last night, just in case, but it looks like not even a zombified version of her crawled through it. I wash, dress, and go downstairs. Mother and Father are in the kitchen per usual, Mother reading the newspaper and Father preparing breakfast.

"Good morning," says Father.

I sit down and give him a nod to let him know I heard. My monster, having followed me all morning, curls up at my feet and I reach down to stroke its slick head. I wait silently until the food is prepared, but my stomach feels too full to eat when I see the steaming French toast. My parents have obviously noticed my mood, so they keep the conversation mostly to themselves. When they're not looking, I slide my food off of my plate and onto the floor next to my monster. A long, red tongue slides out of its mouth and shovels everything inside, and it leaves no evidence of the sneaked meal.

"You should be getting an application invitation for the Association of Exceptional Characters today," says Mother. "That's exciting."

It takes a moment to realize that the comment is directed to me. I look up and give a slight grunt as an answer. She frowns. My father looks to her, then looks to me and reaches out to put his hand on top of mine.

"Audrey... Maybe you shouldn't go to school today."

"Why not?" I ask. "Everyone else will be going. No one is expected to stay home to grieve."

"You can make an exception."

I pull my hand out from under his and stand, jolting my monster into standing as well.

“I’ll see you tonight,” I say and head towards the front door, monster just behind me. I hear my mother call my name, but I don’t turn. My backpack sits next to my shoes, and I pull both on as quickly and calmly as I can. I look up and see Mother has followed me.

“Audrey, listen to—”

She doesn’t get closer than a dozen feet from me before my monster puffs itself up and puts itself between us. It snarls, baring long teeth, and blood begins oozing from its pores like it did the first day it showed up. Mom takes a step back, surprise stretching her features as she looks from it to me. When she tries to take another step forward, it rushes a few steps towards her and bangs its blood-damp fists against the ground, stopping her in her tracks as Father comes up behind her.

I know I should stop my monster, but I don’t want to. This will teach them to leave me alone when I say I want to leave, and I know I can’t handle spending the entire day at home with them.

“Later,” I say, opening the front door. A whistle from me and the monster comes to join me, and we walk out of the house together.

My parents never try to follow me. I don’t know what I’d do if they did, but I can predict that it would not be good. My research yesterday took me deep into the night, and no amount of cover-up can hide the bags beneath my eyes. I found nothing about how to kill the Writers. Nothing about their weaknesses, nothing even about their physical forms — if they even had them. It was as though anyone who knew something about them was written out of the script, killed off before any harm could be done. All I discovered is that the only people to have direct contact with Them are members of the Association of Exceptional Characters, and even then, it is only the highest ranking members.

I get all the way to school before realizing I forgot to stop by Sergei's. I pull my phone out of my jacket pocket and 7 *MISSED MESSAGES* fills the screen.

"Meet me back here at four," I tell my monster. "Do whatever you want until then — oh, and I guess, don't hurt anybody."

It moves away from me reluctantly, but once it's gone, I open up my messages. As expected, they're all from Sergei.

Sergei: [6:53AM] you coming?

Sergei: [6:55AM] a witch tried to leave a book at my house about necromancy. think she meant it for you.

Sergei: [6:55AM] obviously i colored it like a coloring book and threw it away

Sergei: [6:58AM] alright seriously...

Sergei: [7:00AM] please at least tell me youre not dead

Sergei: [7:00AM] least\*

Sergei: [7:02AM] well i guess im gonna walk to school alone....

I'm in the middle of typing a response when I hear someone approaching. I look up. Jimmy walks straight towards me, a smirk twisting the edges of his lips just enough to set my blood on fire.

"Don't say a word," I warn him when he's within earshot. "Pretend your life depends on it."

He chuckles, looking about at the other students milling about us. Many of them try to sneak glances at me, but I only have eyes for Jimmy.

"I just wanted to offer you condolences for your loss," he says.

"That's strike one."

He raises one of his perfectly sculpted eyebrows. "I can't tell you that I'm sorry for you?"

"No." My hands clench into fists at my side, and my shoulders tighten. "Leave."

"Invitations for AEC apps go out today," he says. "I don't suppose you'll be getting one."

The comment takes me aback enough for me to loosen my fists.

"I'm the second-highest performing student in our class. Of course I'm getting an invite."

"I just figured with your abysmal performance at prom, they'll probably remove you from their list. After all, no one wants someone like you to join. They want heroes after all."

My lip curls.

"All right," I say. "That's strike two."

"You'd try to fight me with teachers around?"

"I won't fight you. I'll kill you."

A flicker of fear darts across his face for a moment. He seems ready to give another quip, but Sergei pushes by him from behind and comes to my side.

"Let's go," he says, grabbing me by the arm.

"Always the damsel in distress," Jimmy says. "Makes sense. You don't do too well at being the hero. Too bad Clara didn't know that."

I can't see anything but him. The world around his form blurs. Sergei puts his arm around my waist and hauls me back, lifting me up so that my flailing feet don't even touch the ground. As he drags me away, I watch Jimmy's smug face grow more distant. Desperately, I try prying Sergei's arm off of me, but he doesn't let go of me until we're inside, and he corners me against some lockers.

"Let me go, Sergei. I'm going to rip his throat out, I fucking swear."

He shoves me backward. "Get a hold of yourself. Snap out of it."

“Did you hear what he said?”

“Yeah, and I heard what *you* said, too.”

I stop trying to get past him and press my back against the lockers. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You were going to kill him.”

“I always say that.”

“This time it sounded like you meant it.” When he gets like this, Sergei always looks so much like his dad, his face aging twenty years just from an emotion. “Don’t let him rile you up. Nothing good can come from it.”

“I’d feel better if I beat his ass.”

He shakes his head. “Come on. Let’s get you to homeroom, alright?”

Before leaving for his own, Sergei walks me to my homeroom to make sure I don’t try to hunt Jimmy down. I spend the short period trying to come up with plans and combing through my Lifestyles notes to try to find something useful. Once it’s actually time to go to Lifestyles, my anger has cooled to a simmer.

Mr. Ingram wears only black today, as though he’s in mourning. When I look down at myself, a pang of guilt hits me. I didn’t even think of dressing like that. I’m wearing the same kind of stuff I do every day — jeans, tee-shirt, jacket. Nothing about it is special. Nothing about it had Clara in mind. Our class is mostly subdued, and I mumble an apology to Sergei when I sit next to him.

“Guess I probably overreacted,” I say and glance at the door. Jimmy hasn’t arrived yet.

“Don’t get me wrong, the guy is a serious dick. I just don’t want you to do something you’re going to regret.”

Jimmy walks in right before the bell rings. His stupid grin is gone. Mr. Ingram nods for him to take a seat, and once he's done so, the teacher turns to the entire class.

"There are approximately seven-hundred students in our school, half of which are upperclassmen. Saturday night, only seven students died," he says. My teeth set when he says *only* seven died, but his next words ease my tension. "Such a low number does not make it any less tragic. This does not make the loss easier to deal with. Whether the stories they created were good, bad, interesting, boring — it doesn't matter. And I don't want you to forget that today.

"Were we in another class, the teacher would probably praise Audrey for becoming the star Writer's protagonist. But we know better than that here, don't we? That's why you're in this class. Unlike most of your peers, you realize the world is not just. The Writers are often arbitrary in who lives and who dies, what perils you face going from day to day. Sometimes if you please Them, They will be merciful. Sometimes that will only encourage Them to make you an object of suffering."

Mr. Ingram turns to the white-board and begins writing on it. "You are the strongest characters of the school, and going forward, two paths will be presented to you: the path of the hero and the path of the villain." HERO sits in blue ink on the board, VILLAIN in red. "The ensemble life is not for you, however much you may wish it. Of course, everyone here wants to be the hero, but — Jimmy, did you have something you wanted to say?"

Jimmy sits in the rear of the classroom, leaned back in his desk with an arm draped lazily across the back of his chair.

"I don't want to be a hero," he says. "So, no, not everyone wants to be one."

The class's heads snap back to look at Mr. Ingram, who tightly controls his expression to give away nothing.

“And what would you like to be?” he asks.

“A villain,” Jimmy says, to the quiet surprise of our classroom. “And not some crappy henchman, either. I’m talking Joker levels, having a few dozen people all working for you, fighting the good guys.”

I pick up my pen and begin doodling in my journal, focusing ahead rather than behind so I don’t say anything stupid.

Mr. Ingram asks, “Why would you want to be a villain?”

“Why would you want to be a *hero*? Especially in this world. I can understand, *maybe*, if you’re over in Romance or Comedy why you’d want to be the hero, but here? The bad guys almost always win. Even in Action, it’d be pretty sweet. Look at Tony Soprano<sup>11</sup>, Hans Gruber<sup>12</sup>, Goldfinger<sup>13</sup>. Hell, even Hannibal Lecter<sup>14</sup> lives it up for a while. Even if they end up dying horrible deaths, they *still* spend most of their time living in the lap of luxury, and honestly, the way you live is way more important than the way you die.”

I risk looking up at Mr. Ingram, who, weirdly, doesn’t seem surprised at all by this.

“What do other people think?” Mr. Ingram asks, looking at the rest of the class. “Does anyone agree with Jimmy? Have an argument against him?”

Sergei’s hand shoots up.

“The guilt isn’t worth it. Assuming you’re trying to become the best villain rather than someone who is just mediocre, a lot of the best villains do face-heel turns. Darth Vader<sup>15</sup>, Spike<sup>16</sup>, and Prince Zuko<sup>17</sup> all end up having redemptions arcs and feeling immensely guilty

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<sup>11</sup> The Sopranos (Drama)

<sup>12</sup> Die Hard (Action-Adventure)

<sup>13</sup> James Bond films (Action-Adventure)

<sup>14</sup> Silence of the Lambs (Drama, Thriller)

<sup>15</sup> Star Wars (Science-Fiction/Fantasy)

<sup>16</sup> Buffy: The Vampire Slayer (Horror/Comedy)

<sup>17</sup> Avatar: The Last Airbender (Drama/Comedy; Animated)



about what they did. So even if you were to believe that now, should you go forward, you'll ultimately regret the choices you made." Sergei flicks his head back a bit, his telltale sign of dismissive arrogance I've come to know. "Besides, the number of *Horror* villains that live the life of luxury is way lower than the number of Action villains. Even if you managed to get into the Association of Exceptional Characters, move to Literature, *and* become a villain, you'd have to be way more complex than that."

I lick my lips and listen to Jimmy's heated breathing.

"Living like a villain is still better than living in fear all the time," he finally says. "The villains, no matter who or what they are, have the power and control to make themselves feel secure. Security is a basic human need."

"And morality is a basic human trait, but I don't suppose you'd know anything about *that*." The words slip sharply out of my mouth, my pen digging through the page I'm writing on and slipping into the one beneath it.

"This is an interesting debate," Mr. Ingram says slowly, his face still unreadable, "and one that's been had many times. However, we only have two weeks of class left, and I still have much to teach you before the year ends — even those of you about to graduate. So let's save discussion for now, and maybe we'll try having it again at a later date when tensions aren't so high."

"If Audrey can't deal with it, she can just leave," Jimmy sniffs, and I feel my pen crack in my hand.

"James," Mr. Ingram's voice lashes out, his face grown harder than it had been just a moment ago. "Whatever your future plans are and whatever has happened, you will still treat your classmates and Audrey with respect. Understand?"

The correction of the pronunciation of my name brings the beginnings of a smile to my face, and Jimmy doesn't say another word. The only thing I hear from him is the sound of his chair squeaking as he leans back.

"Now, let's get back to the lesson. You'll have to choose between the paths of hero and villain... Yes, Sergei?"

Sergei puts his hand down.

"Have you received the letters from the Association of Exceptional Characters? About applications?"

Mr. Ingram nods. "I have, but you won't be getting them until it's time to leave. I want you to be paying attention to *me*, after all." He turns sharply to the board. "*Now*, back to the lesson..."

As Mr. Ingram goes on, I let my gaze drift down to my notes — a horrible collage of Clara's name written over and over again, scratched deep into the paper. I turn until I find a page that didn't get ripped into from my deep impressions, a cold sweat coming over me, and I try to pay attention to the lesson as Mr. Ingram goes over the traits of a typical hero — kindness, bravery, leadership — and the traits of a typical villain — rage, self-absorbency, power.

The end of class couldn't come sooner, and I glance over my pages of lazy notes. With a sigh, I close my notebook, tucking it into my bag while I wait for my name to be called out. I'm the third person called, and I snatch my letter from Mr. Ingram. The bell rings just as I sit down and Sergei rises to get his letter.

I turn the fine-printed envelope over in my hands and glance at him.

"I'll see you at lunch," I say, hoping to escape before he has a chance to open his letter.

“Actually, Audrey—” Mr. Ingram’s voice cuts across the room. “Would you stay a moment after class? I’d like to have a word with you.”

I bite back a groan and share a look with Sergei. He shrugs and begins packing up his stuff, his envelope from the Association of Exceptional Characters laid reverently on his desk.

“Wanna open these together at lunch?” he asks.

“Sure.”

Mr. Ingram quickly passes out the remaining letters until the class is empty except for me. A student from his next class tries to enter, but he urges him to wait outside and close the door. My shoulders tense, and I flex my fingers as the teacher sits on top of his desk and looks at me.

“How are you?” he asks.

I shift from one foot to the other.

“I’m fine.”

“I saw your notebook; it’s one of the curses of sitting in the front row,” he says. “I know you’re not okay.”

I pack my stuff up to give my hands something to do, but I leave the Association of Exceptional Characters letter — unopened — on my desk.

“I didn’t choose today’s lesson on a whim,” he says. “Becoming a protagonist is hard, especially in this world, and the possibility for a sequel always looms. I can tell just from the way you’ve been acting today that you’ve already started down one of these paths.” He nods his head backwards to the board, the notes on heroes and villains still scrawled there. “You need to be careful.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say, trying to keep the bitterness from my voice. “I’m in the top of the class. People like me aren’t so stupid to get sucked down the wrong path.”

“Anyone can be taken down the wrong path, Audrey. It’s not about being smart; it’s about failing to notice the subtle changes, the manipulation. In the wrong hands, a character can find herself Face-Heel Turning<sup>18</sup> without any regrets and without even realizing the path she’s on.”

“I’ll be *fine*,” I insist. “God, have some faith in me.”

He frowns, and I look towards the door.

“I don’t know, obviously, but you were probably invited to apply to the AEC. If you were, you should accept.”

I raise a brow. “You mean I should try to get into the organization that kisses the asses of the people who are constantly wrecking our lives? They encourage death and torture for the sake of a scare. They stand by, letting themselves be pampered by the Writers, while the rest of us have to suffer. Why the fuck would I ever join them?”

My throat hurts from how quickly I raised my voice, and my hands shake at my sides. Mr. Ingram appears unperturbed.

“If you want to change a system, especially one like ours, the best way to do it is by infiltrating the power structure,” he says. “Join, play along, rise. Then change it. Maybe you’ll learn something useful that can help you feel better.”

I snort. “I’ll tear them down with my bare hands before I join them,” I say. I haul my book bag onto my shoulder and snatch up the letter. As I walk out, a sudden urge come over me, and I ball the letter, envelope and all, in my hands and throw it in the garbage. Mr. Ingram says

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<sup>18</sup> A trope where a character on the protagonist’s side changed his/her allegiance to the antagonist.

nothing as I leave, and when I thrust the door open, the kids waiting outside cower away from me.

## Chapter 10

My rage has simmered somewhat by the time lunch rolls around. Tables still divide the student body by clique, but the boys don't sprint to the lunch line and some of the couples who usually sit together are missing a half. Nonetheless, students still laugh and joke, pretend nothing is wrong. I find my usual table and sit beside Kate; she drew yarrow flowers behind her ears today, the small blooms disappearing down her neck beneath her blouse. A stack of letters sits in the middle of the table, and I look from them to our group — Harry, Sergei, Kate.

"Add yours to the pile," Sergei says as soon as I sit.

"I don't have it with me," I say.

He groans. "I thought we were going to open all of ours together."

"Sorry." I rest my chin on my hand and look down at my bento box. I don't know what's inside it, but I push it towards Harry anyway. "I'm not hungry."

"You sure?" he asks, but he's already opening it and admiring the food.

"How are you doing?" Kate asks, putting her hand on mine. "Sergei brought us up to speed on what happened."

I shrug. "I'll live."

I look up at Sergei, who I'm sure is sympathetic, but also looks like he's dying with anticipation.

"Don't wait for me," I say. "Go ahead and open your letters."

Kate and Sergei eagerly snatch theirs up, but Harry waits until he's shoved an entire rice ball in his mouth before grabbing his. I watch all of them as they open their envelopes, and I almost smile. They're so eager. I watch them pull the letters out and begin reading.

"Yes!"

Sergei and Kate say the word in unison. When they look up at each other, they reach across the table to high-five and shift their gazes to Harry.

“What’s it say?” Kate asks.

“They wish me luck in my future endeavors,” he says, setting down his letter. “Figures.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

He shrugs. “It’s fine. I’m happy for you guys, though.”

It’s as if he gave her permission to smile again, and Kate lights up.

“Thanks,” she says. “Oh, this rocks!”

She punches her fists in the air, tips backward, and—

“Fuck!”

Someone behind her lets out a cry of pain and something clatters to the ground. Kate and I turn around to see who she’s accidentally hurt.

I smile. “Hey, Jimmy, watch where you’re walking, huh? You ran right into my friend’s fist.”

He rubs his jaw and stares at his dropped tray and toppled food. His eyes, bright blue and furious, can’t seem to decide whether to glare at me or Kate.

“That was my *lunch*,” he hisses.

“It still is if you pick it up,” I say. “Nothing like a little cafeteria-floor dirt to make it a well-balanced meal.”

I catch Kate turn towards me out of the corner of my eye, but Jimmy speaks before she can.

He turns on Kate. “You’d better be buying me another lunch.”

“Yeah, sure,” she says, and reaches for her backpack between her feet.

“Hold up, Kate. You’re not giving him a cent.”

She glances up at me, still elbow-deep in her backpack.

“He’s not wrong, you know,” she says. “It was my fault.”

“Maybe if he hadn’t bought a lunch to spill on me Friday, he would have the money to replace this one.” I wink impishly. “Sore luck, Jimbo.”

His eyes search us for something, and they rest on the letters for a moment. I think he’s going to say something, but instead, he bites his tongue and turns. A savage kick sends his plastic tray skittering across the floor, and as he walks away, my laugh is too loud and too real.

“Gets what he deserves,” I say, turning back to my group.

“That was shitty,” says Sergei.

“I know, right?” I sniff. “Kate should hit his tray more often and see if he’ll stop being a dick weasel. Can you believe he walked away without a quip?”

“I meant you. *You* were shitty.”

I freeze and stare at him.

“Are you serious?”

“You were kind of mean,” Kate agrees quietly.

I look at Harry.

“I don’t know. Dude’s kind of a dick. I thought you were acting fine. A little sassy, but I didn’t see anything wrong with it.”

“Thank you, Harry,” I say. “So what’s wrong with the two of you? Why are you suddenly defending Jimmy?”

“We’re not,” says Kate. “We’re just saying the way you handled it was a bit mean. It’s very out of character for you.”



“You were unnecessarily rude,” Sergei adds.

I roll my eyes. “Whatever.”

“Audrey... We’re kind of worried about you,” says Kate quietly. “You really haven’t been acting like yourself.”

“It’s almost like my girlfriend died or something.”

“It’s more than that,” Sergei says. He looks at me, and I have to turn my face away. “You know it, too.”

“I don’t have to take this.” I grab my backpack and stand, but Kate grabs my hand and tries to urge me to sit down. “Let go.”

The gravity of my voice shakes her, and she quickly releases me. I turn and start to leave the lunchroom, but I only get a few feet before I see Amanda limping her way from the food line. She has a big black boot on her right leg that gives her a limp, and when she sits down at her usual table, the spot usually filled by Brad is empty. I wander over to her.

“Amanda? You’re alive?” She straightens up at the sound of my voice and waits a moment before turning to look at me.

“Oh, hey, Audrey,” she says slowly.

“Is Brad...?”

“He’s okay,” she says. “Lost an arm and a leg to some bear traps, but the doctor said he should make a recovery.” She smiles. “Did you need something?”

“Uh, no, I guess not... How are you doing? I’m guessing you know about Clara.”

“Everyone knows,” she says quickly. “Anyone who was in the school got to watch everything. Those... *creeps* broadcast the security cameras onto the big projection screen above the stage.”

My stomach tightens and I press a hand against it.

“Aren’t you upset?” I ask. My eyes search her face, but I can’t find anything but the same kind of pity one feels when one sees a piece of roadkill.

“Of course I am,” Amanda says, “but I can’t do anything about it, can I? We knew going in there were going to be casualties. I wish it hadn’t been her, but this is life. We can’t do anything about it.”

“You could at least get angry.”

“And what good would that do? Didn’t do you very well when you were looking for her.”

Our glares match each other. She turns around.

“I’m going to finish eating,” she says with her back turned to me.

I look at the other people at her table; those that had been openly staring at us quickly go back to their conversations, trying to pretend I’m not standing here. My hands shake. I look at the back of Amanda’s brunette head then around at the cafeteria. The teachers on lunch duty are talking to each other on the other side of the room.

I grab Amanda by the back of her head and slam her face against the table. She cries out and the friends sitting with her jump away from us. I drag her by the hair out of her seat, and when her boot catches beneath the table, she lets out another yelp of pain. A hard yank gets it out, and when I have her on the ground, I pin her and punch her.

It takes three teachers to pry me off of her. Amanda’s blood coats my hands and her face. As I’m dragged off to the principal’s office, I scream through a veil of tears.

I'm suspended for a week. The principal says he would have had me expelled if not for the "unfortunate circumstances" that led up to this. He says he hopes that I'll have finished grieving by the time I return to school.

Father picks me up, and he's quietly furious in the driver's seat. I stare out the window the entire ride home. The usual conventions seem to have calmed down in the aftermath of prom. It's just as calm as it was this morning: no half-realized specters lurk in passing windows; blood isn't splattered against any lawn ornaments; witches don't practice racist voodoo in their living rooms.

It's positively strange.

When we pull up to our house, I head inside before Father has a chance to turn off the car. I'm halfway up the stairs when his bellow summons me back. I slink into the kitchen and sit at the island. My monster never comes to greet me. I wonder if it's been wandering the neighborhood ever since I loosed it near the school. I hope it will find its way back when it can't find me there.

"Tell me what happened," Father says.

I clasp my hands together to stop them from shaking.

"I don't know," I say. "I was just so... angry. I've never been that angry before. Clara and Amanda were best friends, but when I asked Amanda if she was upset, she just said, 'This is the way things are.' I heard that, and I just... I lost it."

Tears fill my eyes, and I clench my hands together even tighter. Slowly, Father reaches forward and puts his hand on mine.

"Clara's death has been exceptionally hard on you," he says. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

“I’m sorry I was so horrible this morning.” My voice breaks when I say it, but I bite back any tears. “I’m sorry.”

Father comes around the island to embrace me. He holds me tight against his chest, and I cry until ugly snot runs down from my nose. Even now, though, I still feel that anger burning inside of me. I know what I wanted to do when I was hitting Amanda. I don’t *think* I would have done it, but I thought about it.

“I hate it here, Dad,” I whisper. He tenses when I break the barrier we put between us, the lovingness of the word too familiar.

“I know,” he says. “I wish we could leave. You kids don’t deserve to have to live like this.”

When I’ve calmed down a bit, he pulls away and leaves just long enough to grab some tissues from the living room. He offers them to me so I can clean up my face.

“You know you’re still grounded, right?” he asks.

He has the very wisp of a smile, and it makes my lips twitch in reciprocation.

“Aww, come on,” I say.

“One month. You’re housebound,” he says. “*And* a mandatory two-hour bonding time with your mother and me every day.”

I groan playfully. “Oh, God, how will I survive?”

Chapter 11

I lay across the couch with my phone held over my face, looking at Sergei's texts for the thirteenth time that day.

Sergei: [11:38AM] what happened?

Sergei: [12:20PM] are you still in the principal's office?

Sergei: [12:33PM] hello?

Sergei: [1:55PM] ok now youre just ignoring me.

Sergei: [1:57PM] this isnt cool can you please text me back?

Sergei: [1:57PM] im just gonna stalk your house if you dont answer.

Sergei: [2:05PM] dude were all srsly worried about you

Sergei: [2:27PM] I just talked with Mr. Ingram. He told me about your conversation earlier.

Sergei: [2:27PM] I'm coming over right after my Honors Society Meeting.

Sergei: [3:43PM] omw <sup>19</sup>asshole

The last text was nearly fifteen minutes ago, so he should be here any minute.

"Father," I yell, not wanting to get up to find him in the kitchen. "Am I allowed to have guests over while I'm grounded?"

"No," he yells back. The relief that immediately floods me evaporates at his next words.

"But Sergei texted me, and since you obviously don't want to see him, he's allowed over."

I groan and drop my phone on my chest.

"That's just mean," I grumble.

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<sup>19</sup> "On my way."

The doorbell rings, and I stay frozen in place, thinking maybe Sergei won't think I'm home if he doesn't see any movement in the house. But of course, Father gets to the door in a timely manner, and I listen to him and Sergei greet each other. Even from just one room over, I can hear the tight anger in Sergei's tone and pleasantries.

"Oh," I hear Father say. "You found it..."

"It was waiting for her," says Sergei. "I figured it would be better to bring it back than to leave it to run amok."

I sit up immediately and look over to the entryway. Somehow, Sergei convinced my monster to follow him to my house. I smile at it, and it seems to smile at me. Then my eyes drift up to Sergei.

"Upstairs," he says. "Now."

He leaves without me, and I exchange looks with Father. He shrugs and heads back into the kitchen, sparing only a quick glance back at my monster. I sigh before getting up and spend a moment greeting my monster before heading upstairs. It doesn't look like it got into any trouble — unlike me. At least, there are no outward markings of what it's done for the last eight hours.

It follows me upstairs, and when we reach my room, Sergei sits on my bed, a piece of paper clasped in one hand, looking more furious than I've perhaps ever seen him.

"Left it in your locker, huh?" he asks, and he throws the balled up piece of paper in his hands to me. I catch it, smooth it out. It's my envelope from the Association of Exceptional Characters. "Open it."

"I don't need to. I already know what it's going to say."

I close my bedroom door and lean against it.

"What is your problem, Audrey?" he asks. "Can't you see what's happening to you?"

“I’m not going to become a villain.”

“You’re not? Then why have you been such a mean asshole lately? Why’d you beat the shit out of Amanda Johnson?”

“I’m mourning. I’m not thinking straight.”

“That’s an explanation, not an excuse.” He nods to the letter. “And then there’s that. I thought you wanted to get out of this place?”

“I do, but not that way.”

“It’s the *only* way.”

“If I can kill the Writers, then—”

Sergei’s expression of shock is enough to make me pause.

“*Kill the Writers?*” he asks. “Are you fucking insane? That’s just — it’s not even possible, first off. Secondly, are you *trying* to get yourself killed off?”

“I’m trying to get revenge on these monsters that have been wrecking millions of lives for eternity.”

He laughs mirthlessly and throws his hands up in the air.

“Oh, I’m sorry. You’re right. That doesn’t sound like a villain at all. It’s fine if it’s all for revenge<sup>20</sup>, right?”

“It’s better than kissing their asses just so they’ll make me some cigarette-smoking, black-coffee-drinking, pseudo-intellectual fuckwad,” I snap. “You’re fine with whatever they do to those people who aren’t as ‘good’ as you as long as you get to be literary playboy. You’ve never cared about people like Clara or Amanda or even Deval because you think you’re so much fucking better than everyone else.”

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<sup>20</sup> Quote from *Metal Gear Solid V*, a military video game focusing on themes of morality and perception.

“Don’t make this about me.”

“Why not? That’s your big problem, isn’t it? That I don’t worship that group of elitist fakes?”

“You need to watch what you’re saying.”

“What are you going to do? All you’ve ever done is try to craft yourself to be some literary protagonist and join those asshats with the AEC so you can look down your nose at all us genre people in the trenches.”

Sergei gets to his feet.

“You know what? Fuck you, Audrey. If this is how you want to be, then go ahead. I’m done helping you.”

He takes a step towards me, and my monster growls. I push it away with my foot and move so that Sergei has access to the door.

“With all those skills you’ve cultivated at kissing ass, I’m sure you’ll do great with the AEC application.”

He says nothing as he leaves, and he slams my bedroom door behind him. With him out of sight, I loose a roar and bang my fist against it. The wood splinters beneath my force, bits wedging themselves inside of my hand. Shaking with rage, I look around my room for something else to hit, something else to destroy. Fuck Sergei. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He’s always been a pompous asshole. He’s just upset that he wasn’t the star of prom.

I grind my teeth as I stalk about my room. My father knocks on the door after a few minutes.

“Leave me alone.” A bestial growl overtakes my tone. He does not knock again.



I try destroying things in my room — old stuffed animals, clothing, furniture. My monster rips up the remains of whatever I leave behind. This suits me for only so long. I find my computer — one of the few unharmed objects in my room — and continue my research from the previous night. *That's* what I really need to be putting my energy into — figuring out how to kill the Writers. There's just as little information as there was the night before.

Fine. If I can't find the information on the Internet, I'll just have to go get it myself. I lurch out of bed and grab my phone. It's almost ten at night. My parents made three attempts to come into my room since Mother came home, but I moved my dresser to block the door. Unless they bring an ax, they're not getting in. But they're also probably right out there, waiting for me to come out.

Only members of the Association of Exceptional Characters know where to find the Writers. If I can get my hands on one of them — maybe the president of the Horror chapter — surely I can get the intel I'm looking for. I dress loose and dark, my hair done up in a bun to keep it from getting into my eyes. As quietly as I can, I open my window and start climbing out onto the lattice.

My monster follows and puts its stumpy hands on the window sill. When I'm halfway down, it tries to climb down as well, coming headfirst down the lattice, and I hiss at it to stay. It looks at me, pauses, but continues its descent. When we're both in the grass, I put my hands on my hips and glare at it.

"You need to stay *here*," I say. "Okay?"

It blinks. I start quickly into the woods behind the house, but when I look back, it's following me. I try to shoo it back home, but all I'm doing is making a bunch of noise in my

backyard. My eyes flick to the illuminated windows, and I bite my lip. The longer I'm out here, the more likely I am to catch the attention of my parents.

"Stay back, and don't do anything, okay?" I whisper.

Finally, it nods. I head deeper into the woods, using my phone to confirm the location of the Association of Exceptional Characters. The dozen missed calls and texts make me frown. Most of them are from Kate, but a couple come from my parents and Harry. They've been coming ever since Sergei left, and they beg me to call back, to talk to them. I turn off my phone.

The Association of Exceptional Characters will take a few hours to walk to — probably until dawn — so getting a taxi is my number one plan once I get far enough away that my parents can't see me waiting to get picked up by one. Who knows if I'll actually be able to get *in* to the Club, but I'll figure that out when I get there.

The forest isn't very big. It's only a few dozen yards across, dividing one street of homes from another. I follow it east, and when I reach the area I need to cross, I grimace.

Of course I'd end up *here*.

Jimmy and his two lackeys sit in his backyard around a fire pit. The lackeys' backs are to me, but Jimmy faces the forest. The three in the yard seem pretty engrossed in their conversation, so I chance creeping on the darkened right side of the yard.

My foot catches on something — a root, probably. Falling, I land atop a metal lawn sculpture and scatter it noisily across the grass. Jimmy and his henchmen stop talking. They're coming toward me. I try to get up as fast as I can. Metal feathers have buried themselves into my hands and arms, though, and it makes pushing myself to my feet painful and difficult. Just as I'm steadying myself in an upright position, a blow to the back of my knees sends me back down.

"You know, I'm legally allowed to shoot you if you come on to my property uninvited."

I roll over and glare up into Jimmy's eyes. The campfire behind him casts his face in shadows, but his cyan eyes occasionally catch the light. He holds a poker for the fire in his right hand. The backs of my legs sting from where he struck me.

"Pretty sure that's not true," I say. His lackeys — Ben and Ken? I can never remember their stupid names — flank him and grin.

"What are you doing sneaking around my yard?"

Well, there's no good way to answer that.

"Just wanted to get a glimpse of your beautiful face one last time."

He chuckles. "You plan on dying tonight?"

"Quite the opposite."

I start pushing myself up, but he turns the poker towards me and presses the point into my chest.

"Not so fast," he says. "You know, you were a right bitch today."

I sit back and pluck metal feathers from my arms and hands.

"It's part of my charm."

Jimmy nods to his goons, and they move behind me into my blind spots.

"Our lecture today really got me thinking," he says. "Ingram and your boyfriend think there's no point in being a villain. I definitely disagree with them, and I thought no one else was on my side. And then you nearly bashed Amanda's head in at lunch." The goons move in, grab me at the shoulder and haul me to my feet just as I pulled out the last feather. I keep myself calm and loose, the sharp feather still clasped in one hand. "Seems like you agree that being a villain has its perks."

"What are you saying?"

“Don’t be coy. I’ll never admit this again, but you’re smart. You’ve seen it happening to you — the transformation from quirky, kind athlete to vengeful villain. And you’ve allowed it to happen so fast, too.”

It’s one thing to hear that from your teacher or your friends. It’s another to hear it from someone in the top three of your Most Hated Persons list.

“I am nothing like you,” I say, and the cliché tastes bitter on my tongue.

“A different breed of villain, but a villain nonetheless,” he says. “Did you get invited to the Association of Exceptional Characters?”

“Probably. I never opened it.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I figured you of all people would be most interested.”

“That was always Sergei’s thing, not mine.”

Jimmy smiles thinly. I look past him and see the vague shadow of my monster in the trees. It moves silently, creeping closer, and I will it to stay back, hoping some telepathic connection has been arbitrarily built between us.

“I’m only going to make this offer to you once,” Jimmy says. “We’re not so different, you and I. You’ve got a lot of potential, and every supervillain needs his second in command. I plan on doing my first murder tonight, starting off the summer strong. I’ll probably dabble in the occult, see if I can’t get some devilish powers or whatnot. While I’m sure you’ll always resent and envy me for my power and station, as all good commanders do, you’d be exceptionally useful in the coming years. After all, I’m not planning on being any *normal* villain. So, what do you say to becoming partners?”

Is this even real? I stare at him, barely comprehending anything that he’s saying. He smiles a little wider.

“Of course, if you refuse, I could always just make *you* my first victim.”

I gently roll my shoulders and shrug off Ben’s and Ken’s grips. A look from Jimmy commands them to allow it, and I take a step forward so that I’m chest-to-chest with him. I raise my hand slowly and press my palm to his cheek. He seems surprised by the touch, but he doesn’t back away.

“Oh, James,” I breathe, and I stand so that our lips are just an inch apart. “You’re pathetic.”

I slam the metal feather I’d been claspings into his side. It sinks into the flesh beneath his ribs easily, sliding through muscle and sinew. I twist the knife as I rip it out of him, and he falls to his knees with a gasping, silent scream. I slip a finger into his mouth and fish-hook his cheek. As I pull him down, I slam a punch into his gut. He goes down, and I duck away from Ben and Ken trying to get their arms around me. Jimmy flounders on the ground with his jagged wound, unthreatening. I put a few dozen feet between me and his henchmen and square up my fists. I make sure that they’re coming towards me with their backs to the forests, and then I whistle.

Just seconds later, one of them screams and falls. While the other is distracted, I move forward and roundhouse him in the jaw. The feather clutched in my fist bites into my hand and the end clips his cheek. He falls, his head turned towards his buddy who is trying to fight off my monster. It has the other one by the leg, its sharp nails and teeth digging through his jeans and into his flesh.

“Don’t kill him,” I say as I punch my captured lackey in the head. He passes out, and when I look back at my monster, the viscera that used to cover its body has returned and bubbles on its black flesh. “*Don’t.*” It starts and looks at its prey, who has skittered backwards towards his friend. I turn towards him. The bottom of his right leg is soaked through with blood.

“Take your friend,” I say. “Leave. Never bother me again.”

He looks past me, starts to smile. I half-turn and catch Jimmy in my peripheral, raising his fire poker behind me. But he’s too slow for my monster. The gurgling blood on it’s body shoots out and hits him in the eyes, sizzling upon contact. Jimmy screams and falls, dropping his poker and clawing at the blood in his eyes. I look back at his henchmen and raise my brows. The one still conscious has stopped smiling, and he grabs his friend and drags him, half-running, across the yard and away.

I turn back to Jimmy. He’s still clawing at his eyes, choked sobs forcing their way out of his mouth. I pick up his dropped poker and press the point to his ear.

“I wonder if there will ever be a time where you’re not a pain in my ass?” I muse. He holds very still, just his face twitching as the blood — there must be some kind of venom in it — make the muscles convulse and contract. “I suppose if I killed you, you’d still come back to haunt me, wouldn’t you?”

I nick the conch of his ear and pull away. He twitches, but doesn’t say anything. His eyes look like they’re being burned out. I might have felt bad for him if he hadn’t just tried to kill me. *Might* have. I cock my head to the side.

“Look at you. You’re pathetic,” I say. “You’d never become a great villain.”

His hands grope at his sides, reaching for the fallen fire poker or some other weapon. His hands come close to a thick branch laying on the ground, and without thinking, I slam the poker through his hand and pin it to the ground. He screams, attempts to pull it loose. It only hurts him more.

“Pathetic,” I repeat. “Killing you would be a kindness.”

“Please don’t kill me,” he says. Most of the blood has disappeared from his eyes, and it’s left the flesh there black and crisp. “Please don’t... Please...”

“You would have killed *me*. I don’t see why I should spare you — other than the threat of you haunting me, but I could deal with that.” I twist the poker in his hand, and he writhes. “I’m glad that I know about you now. It makes a lot more sense. You never paid much attention to me before I started dating Clara. Then all of a sudden, there you were, always harassing me and threatening me whenever she wasn’t there. You felt like you were second-best, but the truth is, you weren’t even in her top ten.”

I lean against the poker and press my thumb against the injured flesh around his eyes. He strikes my head with his free hand, but I catch it afterward. A twist and a tug looses his shoulder from its socket and he yells again. He’s losing enthusiasm for it, though, turning to whimpers and groans to express his pain.

“You finally ready to give up on screaming?” I ask. “You know how it is. You can scream all you want, but no one ever hears you.”

He grits his teeth.

“I don’t know why you ever bothered taking Advanced Lifestyles if *this* is what you were planning on doing — becoming a hack villain. Or maybe you had to resort to this today, after you found out you weren’t invited to apply for the Association of Exceptional Characters?”

“Fuck you,” he hisses. My hunch was right.

“Such a sad sack.”

I stand and rip the poker from his hand with a flourish. He cradles it to his chest, brings up his knees and rolls onto his side. I kick him, and he spasms. I kick him again. He tries, weakly, to fight back. I kick him again, and again, and again, and again. Grinding my teeth, I put

all of my strength into my strikes, aiming for whatever vulnerable piece of him I can access. A stray kick takes him in the head. He rolls over, limp and motionless. His chest still rises and falls, so he must only be unconscious.

“What a pity,” I deadpan. “We were having so much fun.”

His blood has started drying on the poker, but the violence of my attacks sent droplets everywhere. I feel it flecked on my face, my arms, my hair, each fleck slowly drying. I drop the fire poker and look at my hands then at Jimmy. He’s breathing, but so very still. I can see the white bone peeking out of his punctured, bloody hand. My stomach flips.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, and I stumble back a few feet. He might die like this. My kicks may have given him internal bleeding, especially when you account for how I stabbed him earlier — even if it was shallow. He probably needs to go to a hospital. I’ve always wanted to beat the crap out of him, but kill him?

I swallow.

A part of me tells me that I should be happy with what I’ve done. He deserves to die. He’s garbage, plain and simple. He’s never done a good thing in his life. He’s been cruel to me, disgusting. He and his ilk should all be burning in Hell.

But he’s a person, and I went well and beyond defending myself. I may have killed someone. I may have done exactly what he had asked me to — murder — because, in his own words, “we’re not so different.”

I wipe any possible fingerprints off of the poker with my shirt and drop it in the grass. Jimmy’s a big guy, but not big enough that I can’t drag him. I whistle at my monster and tell it to help me. When it comes over, it opens its large mouth and tries to fit Jimmy’s foot into it. I snap at it and nod it over towards me.



“Help me drag him to the back door,” and together, we do. I dig Jimmy’s phone out of his pocket and dial 911. As soon as I’ve given them the address and the basic situation — guy bleeding to death — I hang up. I wipe my fingerprints away again, and then my monster and I take off sprinting into the forest. Halfway between our houses, I come to a stop and pull out my phone. Kate is my most recent missed call, so I call her back.

“Thank god,” she says. “I thought you were never going to talk to us again.”

“Is Sergei with you?” I ask.

“Yeah. What’s wrong? You sound upset.”

“You guys may have been right... About me. Can you pick me up?”

I give her a nearby street corner, but we stay on the phone as I make my way over to it. I linger in the brush until I see Kate’s jalopy pull up, Sergei and Harry taking up the backseat. I hang up the phone and make my way towards them. It’s hard to see their faces. I open the door so my monster can sit shotgun to Kate, then I climb in the back with the boys.

“Whose blood is that?” Harry asks. His voice trembles.

“What happened?” asks Sergei.

I look down at my hands. I can’t answer. Instead I cry.

## Chapter 12

The boys help me inside when we reach Kate's house, and Kate threatens to beat up my monster if it's viscera stains the navy blue carpet. She abandons it to Sergei and Harry, and takes me to the bathroom to wash and change into better clothes. She leaves some of her extra pajamas on top of the toilet seat cover, and I sink down into the shower once she's gone. I sit and cradle myself, head between my knees to ease the horrendous nausea wracking my body.

How have I been this stupid?

It takes half an hour to get clean. I scrub at my skin until it's raw and pink, then soaping it repeatedly because I can still feel the flecks of Jimmy's blood even if I can't see them. Eventually I give up trying to wash it off and I exit the shower. Kate's clothes are warm and comforting, oversized and perfect for feeling like I want to curl up into myself and die. I shamble into the living room. The hushed whispers of my friends stop when they hear me come in.

"Are you ready to tell us what happened?" Sergei asks.

Slowly, I explain what happened. No one interrupts me.

"I called an ambulance for him," I say. "Hopefully it wasn't too late."

"God, Audrey." Kate puts her hands over her face.

"Why didn't you just listen to us?" Sergei asks. "We told you that you were being weird. We warned you this would happen."

I stare down at my hands. "I know. I'm sorry. I don't... I don't know what—"

"No one really knows how the Fog works," says Kate. "We *all* know—" She turns a sharp look at Sergei. "—that it can influence us better at times of trauma. That must have been what happened here."

"I guess I just thought I wasn't stupid enough to get caught up in it."

“It’s not about being stupid,” Kate says. “The Fog is... Godlike. It’s okay if you can’t always fight it. That’s a lesson that never stuck into your or Sergei’s brain.”

Silence takes over the room. I bite my lower lip.

“Your parents called your phone while you were in the shower,” says Sergei.

My heart clenches. “Did you talk to them?”

“We let it go to voicemail. They called all of us shortly after, but no one answered. They must have realized you’re not at home.”

I rub my eyes. They ache from crying.

“How am I going to face them?” I whisper. “I’ve been acting like such a... such a *bitch*. This morning, I threatened them — my monster threatened them for me, too. You know that’s not like me.”

The monster had been seated next to Harry, curled up at his feet. When he hears me, his hand snaps back quickly from scratching its head.

“If you let yourself become consumed by that kind of rage or lust for revenge, you know what’s going to happen to you,” says Sergei. “Crein will turn you into a villain.”

“I know.” I clench my hands into fists. “I don’t know what to do, though... I can’t just sit here. I hate just sitting here and taking it. The Writers abuse us. They do whatever They want, and They don’t care how it affects us. Shouldn’t we do something about it? Shouldn’t we at least try to revolt?”

“I mean, that’s kind of already happened,” says Harry. “Isn’t that what the New Millennium Purge was? People trying to defy the Writers?”

“And over a million people died,” says Sergei. “Millions more were tortured or harassed.”

I frown. “They’d never kill *all* of us.”

“Which makes it okay?”

“Audrey, I understand what you’re saying.” Kate places a hand on my shoulder and I look up at her. “I think it should change, too. But the way you’re going about it isn’t going to get the kind of change you want. There will always be the Fog and the Writers. We can’t escape that.”

Sergei adds, “If you really want things to change, you have to work *with* the system. It’s the only way you’ll take down an enemy this powerful.”

My gaze snaps to him.

“So you agree that They’re the enemy then?”

He grimaces and looks to the side. “I don’t know. A lot of the Writers in Horror are pretty bad. They do horrible things to us. But I don’t think They’re *all* bad. They can’t be.”

Well, it’s a step in the right direction.

“What did you do with your letter from the AEC?” he asks.

“I don’t know... It’s somewhere in my room, I guess.”

“After school tomorrow, you, me, and Kate are going to their headquarters to apply for consideration. Harry, you can tag along, too, if you’d like. If you *really* want to change things and don’t want to get anyone killed in the process, infiltration is the only way you’re going to do it.”

I purse my lips. Even if I’m aware Crein is trying to craft me into a villain, it doesn’t mean I’ll be able to resist the Fog or do anything to stop it. But there’s more than one way to escape that fate.

“Okay,” I say. “We’ll apply together.”

Once we've decided on a plan, I text my parents and tell them I'm on my way home. They try calling, but I'm not quite ready to hear them yelling at me, so I dismiss their calls as they come up. Kate drives me home, and as we approach, I see my parents sitting on the front porch, arms crossed over their chests.

"Yikes," says Kate. "Good luck with that."

I grimace. "Thanks."

My parents have already started coming up the drive, so I get out of the car before they have a chance to catch Kate and berate her. My monster sticks to my heels and quivers behind me as my mom directs her glare at it.

"Hey," I say.

"Where have you been?" "We've been worried sick!" "You could have died!" The conventional words of worried parents pour out of their mouths. Both of them look angry, but Mother is shaking, her face bright red. After I've withstood a few minutes of their yelling, tears break out of Mother's eyes, and she grinds them furiously. Father rubs a hand against her back to comfort her and tells me to get inside.

"The monster stays out here," he says when it begins to follow me.

The monster and I both look up at him, faces aghast.

"No way," I say. "It comes with me."

"No, it doesn't." Mother steps forward. Tears occasionally spill out of her eyes, but she bars most of them now. "That thing is never coming into our house again."

My heart clenches. Are they really acting like Teen Drama parents? For the second time tonight, I question if this is real.

“It’ll just come back and be wild or something,” I say. “It’ll be classic monster movie up in here.”

“We’ll prepare to deal with it,” says Mother. “We’re not going to have that thing living in our house anymore. Period.” She looks at it, her gaze as harmful as any weapon. “Now get.”

My monster recoils and sends a desperate look to me. I shake my head. I can’t do anything — not if I want to retain my civil liberties for any significant portion of my life. Mother and Father don’t usually crack the whip when it comes to punishment — they never really have to — but I know that another slip-up after getting expelled can only be bad, bad, bad.

“Don’t hurt anyone.”

Chapter 13

Sergei [8:33AM]: rumors that jimmys in the ER so you didnt kill him at least

Kate [8:35AM]: Hey! Not sure if Sergei texted you, but Jimmy is apparently in the hospital. So.... You didn't kill him yet? Congratz, I guess?

Kate [8:35AM]: Also, no word on what caused it. Phil and Bill are here, and they both look like shit. They just keep saying they were in a car accident.

Kate [8:36AM]: Saying they have no idea what happened to Jimmy, either, but the rumors are nuts – serial killer (he's not even dead!), drug lords, werewolves. You're not one of the rumors, though.

Sergei [8:36AM]: dont forget were coming for you later. no skipping out

I send some cursory responses when I wake up around eleven. I sit up and stretch towards my feet, surprised when I don't find the slick back of my monster. I frown at the empty spot at my feet and nudge the blankets as though it might be hidden somewhere, nested in a tangle of sheets.

I rise, dress, do everything I can within my room that doesn't require leaving it. My stomach growls, and I crack the door. Mother should be at work, but Father will be lurking somewhere — his studio, the kitchen, I guess maybe the bathroom. I sneak my way downstairs, keeping a careful gaze about me. I hope I can just get a bowl of cereal without incident, and when I reach the kitchen, I breathe a quiet sigh. The bowls clink loudly together, and I try to get my food prepared as quickly as I can.

“Audrey.”

His voice comes from behind me as I'm pouring milk. It shakes me so that drops of white fling from the jug, splattering me and the counter. I set the jug down in a pool of it's own contents and breathe deeply.

“Hey.” I say. I grab a paper towel from the nearby roll and begin mopping up the spill. I don’t look at him.

“How’d you sleep?”

“Fine.”

I finish cleaning up the mess. I throw the paper towels in the trash and return the milk to the fridge. I turn and face him. He’s sitting at the island, and after a moment, I decide to take the seat next to him.

“Hey, so I know I’m grounded,” I say into my cereal bowl, “but I have a question.”

“What is it?”

“So, we got our letters from the Association of Exceptional Characters yesterday.” I feel him tense beside me. “They want me to apply.” He exhales. “I didn’t want to do it at first. I hate the Writers, and it feels like the AEC people are just the Writers’ lackeys, and well, I just wanted... I guess now I’m thinking that if I join, and I get in, then I can change stuff, like the way they run and whatever.”

“That’s great to hear, Audrey,” he says. “You’ve never seemed super enthusiastic about getting in there, so your mother and I were a bit worried if you’d even apply. If you get in, you’ve got a good life ahead of you.”

“Yeah.” I stuff a heaping of wheat flakes in my mouth. “Anyway, Sergei and Kate — they also got invited — wanted me to go with them to Horror HQ today—”

“No Harry?”

I shake my head.

“Poor kid.”



“Yeah, he seems kind of bummed. Anyway, the rest of us were gonna go to the HQ and fill out the application. I know I’m not technically allowed to leave the house and you guys are pretty pissed at me, but I thought, you know, maybe that’d be an okay excuse.”

He sighs, and I embrace the idea of having this request rejected. No one can be upset with me if my parents won’t let me go.

“What time are they going to get here?”

My heart drops. “Like 2:45 or something. Right after school.”

“If you go straight there and straight back, then I’ll allow it. And I’m sure your mother would be fine with those conditions, too.”

“Kay.”

I hope that he’ll leave, but of course he doesn’t.

“We’re not mad at you. Of course we’re upset about what happened yesterday, but only so much of that can actually be blamed on you.”

“I was really an asshole, though.”

“I’m not saying you weren’t, and I’m not saying that you’re blameless. But Writers have a great way of flaring up tension in a person, especially when they’re as vulnerable as you are.”

I take another bite of cereal.

“Did anything like this ever happen to you and Mother?”

“Your mother had the typical scares and fights with brainwashing warlocks, but that’s about it.”

“And you?”

“Yeah. I had a pretty bad Halloween.”

I look up at him. He isn't looking at me anymore, instead staring out into the rest of the kitchen, his eyes aimless.

"We don't have to talk about it."

He shrugs. "I won't go into detail. I don't think it would help you. But I've felt how a Writer can influence you to do things you never in your life thought you would do. Stuff you would have otherwise thought completely stupid or ridiculous. And They can manipulate your feelings to make you act like an entitled brat or an otherwise stupid boy — that was your mother's favorite thing to call me. Nothing quite like your prom happened to me, but it was bad. I talked to your mother about what happened last night, and she's a bit more understanding about it now. Doesn't mean that she's not upset, just that she understands."

"I guess that's a relief."

"We just want the best life for you possible."

"I know."

He stands and claps me on the back.

"Do some homework or something," he says. "I'm going to go up to my studio and paint. Let me know if you need anything."

Sergei texts me when he, Kate, and Harry leave school. Dozing, I wait for them in the living room, the crumpled letter from the Association of Exceptional Characters smoothed out on my lap. The honk of Sergei's jalopy spooks me out of my mindless stupor. I grab my letter and purse and yell a goodbye to Father. He beats me to the front door and gives me a tight hug.

"Be back by five."

"Will do."

He kisses me on the head and opens the door for me. "Love you."

"Love you."

The chill of the air shocks me, eliminating any semblance of lethargy. It's winter puffing out a final breath in April, a reminder that it will be back in just a few months. Kate opens the car door opposite her so I can get in the backseat. Before pulling out of my driveway, Sergei looks at me.

"You've got your letter?"

"Yep."

"All right then."

He begins pulling out of my driveway, giving a wave to my father who still stands in the door.

"Where's your monster?" asks Harry from the shotgun seat. "It's been with you so often we figured you'd bring it with you."

"My parents made me kick it out of the house."

Kate sucks her teeth. "Of all the parents do that, I would picture your parents as last on the list."

"I know, right?" I say. "I told them they were just asking for monster movie shit, but of course they don't care. Mother said they'd just 'deal with it' whenever it happened."

"Yikes."

I look at Kate, inspecting the flowers she's painted today: roses outlined in navy.

"Any more news on Jimmy?"

She shakes her head. "Nada. No news is good news, though, right?"

I press my lips together and turn to the window. We're lucky to live within driving distance of the Association of Exceptional Characters Horror Headquarters. While I'm sure there's nothing wrong with the embassies scattered across the world, it feels safer to drive to Salem and know that your application doesn't need to survive the post office in order to even be analyzed. For the twenty-minute drive, I listen to the others talk about their days. It's enough to take my mind off of the situation at hand, but not enough to stop my hands from worrying the bottom of my sweater.

"Christ, that place is huge," Harry says, and I turn my gaze to his window.

If someone had never been to Salem before, it's size would probably surprise them on the first visit. It holds over 40,000 people, meaning it's not huge, but neither is it dinky. There aren't any skyscrapers, but there are looming Victorian houses that make you feel small in their presence. It's an interesting place to say the least, and if you're like Harry — who, despite living just a few miles away, has somehow never visited — it's probably a shock to see that it's just as modern as any other city in the Northeast. Of course, many people *do* avoid it; if you're not part of the Association of Exceptional Characters, the history of pissed off Native Americans, execution of innocent people, and practice of witchcraft makes it one of the number one settings for Writers.

But Harry isn't ogling at the size of the town or the vague sense of death permeating the streets. He ogles at one of those intimidating mansions I mentioned — an apparently Victorian construction that seems too big to be settled in the heart of Salem. Sergei parks on the street, and when we get out of the car, we're given a better look. The house — a word I use loosely — looks as though it was once half a dozen houses that have somehow been knitted together with wood paneling, remodeled so as to take away all but a hint of its Frankensteinian construction.

“I’m shocked that the Association of Exceptional Characters has a flair for the dramatic,” I scoff.

In front of the building is a huge half-circle drive, a few cars parked against the outer curb. Sergei pulls up as close we he can towards the front entrance and turns off the car.

“Are you coming in?” he asks Harry.

Harry looks around and shrugs. “There’s a bench over there. I’ll probably just lounge for a bit — get a head start on my summer reading project.”

“Nerd,” Kate teases, punching him in the arm. “Well, we should be back soon. Don’t die out here.”

“I’ll try not to.”

The three of us walk down across the half-circle drive with Sergei in the middle. The building seems to grow as we get closer, curving forward so that it blocks the cold April sun and casts us in a deeper chill. I rub my arms through my sweater to try to warm them. When we reach the porch, a small brass sign hangs beside the front door, reading:

ASSOCIATION OF EXCEPTIONAL CHARACTERS

HORROR CONCENTRATION HEADQUARTERS

OPEN EVERY DAY 4PM - 4AM

Sergei reads the sign carefully and raises his hand to the front door. Then he lowers his hand. He raises it again, lowers it, raises it halfway—

“You all right, bud?” I ask.

He wipes at the sheen of sweat gathering on his mahogany forehead.

“Yeah,” he says. “Let’s go.”

He opens the door quickly, and Kate and I follow him inside. It certainly seems the type of place Sergei would feel at home. The grandeur of it, though typical in architecture and decor, mirrors the modernity and majesty of Sergei’s spiral home. A grand staircase fills the foyer and demands first attention, though access to it is denied by velvet ropes. Just in front of it sits a massive desk with the intimidating face of a green man carved into its front, flowers and leaves carved around him. The secretary who sits at the desk does not raise his head from whatever he is doing. As we walk towards him, portraits of grim-faced men and women seem to follow us with their eyes. They hang in imposing hugeness on the walls, helping to make us feel just that much smaller.

“Excuse me,” says Sergei when we approach the secretary. He looks a hundred years old, so he’s either too engrossed in whatever he’s writing to notice us, deaf, or rude. Sergei raises his voice. “Excuse me. We’re here to apply for enrollment.”

“I heard you the first time,” says the man.

Sergei puts his letter on the desk and leans forward slightly. When the secretary looks up, his nose wrinkles slightly.

“Here are our papers,” Sergei says, no hint of malice in his voice. Kate and I take the hint and set ours down as well.

After a few long seconds of writing, the man sets his pencil down and adjusts the reading lenses on the edge of his nose.

“ID?” he grunts.

We dig around for them while he scrutinizes our papers. The moment our hands near him with our driver’s licenses, he snatches the cards and holds them beside the appropriate letters.

“I guess I’ll grab some applications.” While he rummages through his desk, Kate and I exchange a look. She bears her teeth in a grimace. Finally, the secretary drops three clipboards in front of us with thick packs of paper in each of them. “Go sit by the fire, and you can fill these out. Bring them back when you’re done.”

He goes back to his writing without another word. With nothing left, we turn around. Enraptured by the staircase, I hadn’t noticed the fireplace to the side of the room, a green man the same as the one outside on the desk embedded into its iron casting. There are only a handful of other people here, all of them working studiously on the application. I flip through the pages and see the last one labeled as “Page 32.” Cursing, I sit in a floral settee close to the fireplace.

I don’t recognize the others that are here despite our apparent closeness in age. They must have been just as eager as Sergei to get this process started. I glance at the girl beside me on the settee and see she’s about halfway through her application. She looks more at home here than I ever would, having embraced the current trend of faux-intellectual hipster fashion complete with beanie, over-sized flannel, and boots. Meanwhile, I’m dressed in a forgettable outfit — an oatmeal sweater, boot-cut jeans, sneakers. It’s obvious who is most fit to be this place’s protagonist.

The first page of the application is nothing unexpected — name, age, minority status. As I proceed, a few questions ask about protagonist status (I hesitantly check yes) and previous encounters with plot-based situations. Luckily (or unluckily? It’s hard to know what they want), I don’t have a lot of experience here. Mother and Father taught me since I could understand how to avoid those kinds of situations and therefore subvert the entire experience. Nearly every question is allowed several pages of blank lines for answers, but I end up only filling in half a page at most. I reach the age-old question of “Why do you want to be a member?” and freeze.

After several minutes battling hand cramps and the desire to write a hate letter, I craft it differently and say that I want to make Horror a better place, and I believe I can do that through the help of the Association of Exceptional Characters. I leave it at that.

I finish even before the girl who had been halfway through her app. I go to the secretary and place my clipboard in front of him so the corner nudges his writing pad.

“What?” he asks, glaring up at me. “Did something on the application not make sense?”

“No. I’m done.”

His eyebrow raises. Quickly, he snatches my clipboard and examines the application.

“You’re sure?” he asks.

“Yes.”

He smiles with a coldness. “Okay, then. I’ll send it right up to be examined.” He removes the papers and places them in a stack on his desk labeled “To Be Evaluated.”

I thank him and turn around. Sergei glances up at me to raise a brow, but I just nod. I head outside and join Harry on the bench.

“Wow, that was quick,” he says, closing his hardback script. “You were only in there for, what, twenty minutes?”

“Yeah.”

“Did something go wrong on the application or...?”

I shrug. While there’s a lot to be said about Salem’s flaws, there’s also a lot to be said for its beauty. It’s the pinnacle of New England aesthetic, especially looking out from the AEC headquarters. It’s just trees and old houses and the gentle tweeting of birds. I take a deep breath.



“I just answered the app honestly, you know? Like obviously I tried not to say stuff like, ‘The Association of Exceptional Characters construction is stupid and elitist and perpetrates violence in the community,’ but I was still just honest.”

“That seems a risky move.”

“Honestly, I’m still kind of on the fence about this whole thing. But it at least gives me some time to procrastinate and hopefully get Crein off my ass for a bit.”

We sit in silence for a while, Harry reading his book and me watching the scenery. Occasionally, people walk in and out of the AEC, but no one pays us any mind, and so we don’t pay them mind. Eventually, Kate comes out, looking harrowed and sleepy.

“If I don’t make it, I’m never applying again,” she says, sitting in the empty space between me and Harry. She looks at me. “Dude, how did you finish so fast?”

I repeat what I said to Harry.

“Bold move. Hope it works out for you. I ended up rechecking my answers three times before I finally turned it in. That dude at the front desk is a douche, though.”

“And the rest of the AEC is probably just like him.”

She says nothing, choosing instead to pull out her phone and browse the Internet. A car pulling up behind Harry’s catches my eye. It’s probably one of the most expensive cars I’ve ever seen actually being driven, and when the driver climbs out, I’m taken aback by his appearance. His clothes are unremarkable, but his face is just so... He’s not ugly, not in the way that marks a person as a villain or plain old creepy. But he’s also not handsome. He’s just so in the middle, and I’ve never seen that before. Everyone I know is beautiful, crafted with perfect skin and well-defined bodies. If they’re not, then they’re hideous or at least look like their image is purposefully crafted. This man is different. His hair is a dull brown and lies slightly disheveled

(and not handsomely disheveled or creepily disheveled, just something in between that). When he gathers a stack of papers from his car, I see that he's a few pounds overweight with a belly jutting over his belt buckle. He comes towards us and the entrance to the AEC, and after a few steps, a dash of wind slips over the top half of his papers and carries them off. He yelps, tries to grab one, and they all come rushing towards me, Kate, and Harry. The three of us instinctively start grabbing them to stop them from venturing any further while the strange man chases them towards us. Hunched over, he gathers those that have gathered around our feet.

"I'm so sorry. I thought I had a good grip," he says, taking the rescued papers from Harry and Kate. He turns to me, down on one knee, and I can't even question the wonder on his face because I'm so caught up by this close up. His pores are huge, not small and smooth like everyone else's. His eyes are an unremarkable shade of brown to match his hair, and his features don't match in a pleasing way. I'm again shocked by this idea of him looking neither handsome nor hideous, and I try to look a little to the right of him so that I don't have to stare at this enigma head on.

"It's no problem," I say, holding my papers out to him. He takes them slowly and clutches his recovered pile to his chest.

"You're Audrey Ericson, right?" he asks, and my surprise makes me look him in the face again. "You were in Crein's latest work? With prom?"

I try to keep a straight face and nod.

"I'm so sorry to hear about that. The story was really beautiful, but I understand if you don't think so."

"How do you know about it?" asks Kate. "Like, how do you know the story was beautiful if all that's come out are news articles?"

He rubs the back of his neck with one short-fingered hand.

“I’m actually Mr. Crein’s editor, so I got to play the beta version of the game once he finished it.”

“So you know him well?” I ask, my interest piqued.

He nods. “Are you all here to apply for the AEC?”

Rather than have to explain Harry’s being here, we all agree.

“That’s awesome. Well, I hope all of you get in. The physical is pretty tough, though, so be prepared for that.”

The sound of the front door creaking open a dozen yards behind us echoes through the yard.

“Well, I better go get these edits and notes to Mr. Crein. I hope I see you again!” He runs off, and I turn around to watch him go. Sergei has just exited, and the two nearly run into each other. The editor ducks his head and swerves around him, disappearing into the mansion.

“Hey, you’re finally done,” Kate calls out to Sergei. “Thought Audrey was gonna have to get in trouble with her dad for getting home late.”

Sergei glares at her and comes to stand in front of our bench. “I was being thorough,” he said. “This is probably the most important thing I’ll do in my life. I need to make sure it went well.”

“Did they say how long it’d be until you know if you’re gonna be invited for the physical?” Harry asks.

“Two days until notices, and then the physical will take place over the weekend.”

“That’s so soon. How are you supposed to prepare for that?” Kate asks.

“If you weren’t prepared already, you’re probably not going to make it.”

## Chapter 14

Sergei is unbearable for the next two days. I mean, honestly, unbearable. My parents? Fucking child's play compared to this guy. And I know it's not just me — it's our whole group feeling it. Honestly, I'd rather be dealing with Jimmy, but he's still up in the hospital. Apparently he hasn't died yet.

On Tuesday, Sergei wasn't so much obnoxious as he was just quiet. Every time his phone buzzed, he would jump in his seat, wait desperately for the teacher to look away, and then check to see if he'd gotten an email from the Association of Exceptional Characters. I tried pointing out to him after Lifestyles that we'd probably be getting the notice by mail since the AEC seems to hate technology, but he insisted that it was still *possible* to get an email or call from them, so he checked anyway. He looked exceedingly not like himself, too, sloppily dressed and his dreads just tossed up in a heavy bun at the back of his head. He didn't look like he'd been getting any sleep, either, with dark purple bags hanging underneath his eyes. At lunch, I watch him down Red Bulls and coffee so that the shaking of his over-caFFEinated body keeps him awake for the rest of the day. Kate, Harry, and I talk about stealing his drinks so that he can maybe actually sleep, but decide it'd be worse on him, and besides, it'll only last until tomorrow.

He texts me for the entirety of Tuesday night, asking inane questions that I cannot possibly answer. Where did I think the physical was going to take place? What was my answer to question 23 on the application, and how did I think it compared to his? Would he be deducted points for bumping into Crein's editor? After I tell him I'm going to sleep, the buzzing vibrations of his incoming texts every few minutes force me to set the phone on silent to get any sleep.

I wake up Wednesday morning to 73 new text messages. 12 are from a group chat with Kate and Harry. The other 51 are Sergei. I skim them for anything important, but it's all just him

worrying about today. The texts are a mix of prideful hope and self-deprecating hopelessness.

Based on the time stamps, he probably didn't go to bed until after six in the morning.

I find him out on the bench in front of his huge, art-deco house, slumped over with some drool dribbling from the corner of his open mouth. He holds a can of Red Bull in his right hand, and two more are tucked into the side pockets of his backpack between his feet. I think about leaving him there to get some much-needed sleep, but I know he'd kill me when he found out, so I kick his foot to wake him, and we walk to school together.

Lifestyles comes, and Sergei spends the entirety of it shaking, his eyes darting around the room while Ingram lectures. I think he's looking for another stack of envelopes like the ones we received last Friday. Eventually, the bell rings to signal the end of class, and when Mr. Ingram dismisses all of us, Sergei's thin, trembling hand shoots up.

"Are we getting letters from the Association of Exceptional Characters?" he asks.

Mr. Ingram holds back a smile. "You should be getting those in the mail today, I would think."

"But this is where we got our first letter, so I thought..."

"That was only because everyone in an advanced Lifestyles class gets one. These are specific to the individuals who applied, so they'll be delivered by mail." Mr. Ingram shrugs.

"Sorry, Sergei. You'll have to wait."

Sergei doesn't come to lunch.

Me [12:05PM]: you went home to wait for the postman, didn't you?

Sergei [12:06PM]: .....

Me: [12:06PM]: That's what I thought.

"I almost hope that he doesn't get in," says Kate. "At this rate, he'll die of anxiety before he can even be inducted."

Sergei calls me while I'm still in class at 1:57PM. I quickly press the END CALL button and allow him to go to voicemail. He texts me directly afterward.

Sergei [2:01PM]: Check your voicemail!!!!

Sergei [2:01 PM]: fuck class it doesn't even matter!!! check yourphone!!

Even if he's being obnoxious, it's kind of cute to see him acting like this. Sergei is usually so stoic, too cool to show a real interest in anything. But he's not like that today.

Me [2:02PM]: sergei, you know I love the sweet sounds of your voice, but you don't need to leave me voicemail just so I can hear it

Sergei [2:02PM]: fuck you!!!! Listen to the message!!!!!!!!!!

I wonder how many of those exclamation points are fueled by caffeine and how many are fueled by excitement. I tell him I'll check the voicemail as soon as the bell rings and ignore my phone for the rest of calculus. And I do. The bell rings at 2:15, and I pull out my phone (seven unread text messages from Sergei) and dial my voicemail.

"You have *one* new message," says the robotic voice. "First unheard message."

I pull my phone sharply away from my ear as screaming erupts out of the speaker. My heart skips a beat, and I worry that I've made the wrong call. Maybe this isn't about the AEC after all. Maybe he's actually in trouble, and I've spent all this time teasing him when really he was getting chased by an axe murderer with—

"I passed!" Sergei finally yells. "Dude, I did it! I fucking did it! I'm picking you and Kate up from school. We gotta get you guys home and see if you're taking the physical."

My anxieties pushed away, I laugh into the receiver. I find my locker and stuff my books inside. I've only a handful of homework to do, but I know I'm not getting anything done tonight, not if Sergei can help it. Besides, if I get invited to the physical — which I'm sure I did, probably — then I'll get a pass for the rest of the week's homework anyway. I find Kate at her locker with Harry, and we talk about this rare sighting of an excited Sergei while we head to the pick-up lot.

"I'm actually just going to head home," Harry says as we exit the building. "I'll see you guys later."

He heads off towards his bus before either Kate or I can ask him to stay. We watch him climb onto this bus, and Kate frowns.

"Poor guy," she says. "I think he's really upset about the AEC thing."

"Yeah?"

"He told me he didn't think he'd get in — and I believe that, you know? — but I think he was still hoping he could at least apply."

Sergei managed to wedge his car between two school buses, and the sight of him half-leaned over the passenger seat abates our concerns for Harry. Besides, he shouldn't have to worry. I'd never say it aloud, but he's so forgettable and plain (I love him, but it's true) that he barely makes Extra status.

Harry out of my mind, I whisper a plan into Kate's ear and we approach Sergei's car.

"Hey! Get in, guys!" Sergei yells through the open passenger window.

He fumbles with the door handle, trying to push it open. Kate and I pass in front of his car, and I watch out of my peripheral as he struggles to get back into the driver's seat and roll that side's window down.

"Kate! Audrey! Where are you guys going?"

Kate looks back at him. "Oh, hey, Sergei! We're just walking home," she says, smiling brightly. "See you tomorrow!"

I clamp my mouth shut against the giggles that want to come out, and I listen to the awkward back-and-forth of Sergei's car as he tries to get it out from between the buses. Kate and I cross the street but slow our walk so that he can actually catch up to us before we lose sight of each other. He finally rolls up beside us, snapping his gaze between us and the road.

"Come on, guys. Stop teasing!"

"Sorry, I don't want no scrubs," says Kate. "You can holla at someone else."

"Do *not* use TLC against me," <sup>21</sup>he says. "Now come on! You're killing me."

Kate and I laugh and then finally agree to get in. We both climb into the back, and Sergei rockets off to my house. I hang out the side window to open the mailbox and find that Father has yet to get the mail. I search through it until I find the envelope made of expensive parchment with embossed letters, addressed to "Miss Audrey Marie Ericson." Once I close the mailbox flap, Sergei starts towards Kate's house.

"Open it," Sergei says.

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<sup>21</sup> "No Scrubs" by TLC



I rip open the side of the envelope and slide the letter out. The paper feels rich beneath my finger tips, an off-white cream that screams status and money. I unfold it and allow Kate to read over my shoulder.

*Dear Miss Ericson:*

*Thank you for your application to the Association of Exceptional Characters. After reviewing your application, we are happy to extend to you an offer to take the next step in becoming a member of our establishment. In this next stage, you will engage in the Physical and Emotional Examination (PEE), which will judge your ability to adapt to and survive in genres that are not your own. You will spend approximately twenty-four hours in a genre assigned by compatibility to your personality, and judging will center on the choices you make to move the story forward and enhance your character. This will be followed by an interview on Sunday, April 22, and you will be asked to remain at your local branch until decisions are made. Decisions should be made no later than 7:00PM, Sunday, April 22.*

*The PEE will take place starting this Friday, April 20th, at 8:00PM. Please meet promptly at your local Association of Exceptional Characters office on Friday in order to ensure this process goes smoothly. Those who fail to check in by eight o' clock will be denied entry. If you are a student, please present this letter to your principal or academic advisor to excuse your absences until Monday so that you may have time to study and prepare. If you have any questions, please visit your local office or call us at the number below.*

*Sincerely,*

*The Association of Exceptional Characters — Horror Branch*

“You did it!” Kate squeals, wrapping her arms around me. “Ah, I’m so proud of you, girl!”

Sergei cheers, and I smile. It’s as expected, and I don’t find myself thrilled at the idea of attending the PEE (the name, though, does give me a bit of a childish giggle). We find our way to Kate’s house — nearly identical to mine though it’s in a different neighborhood. After climbing out of the car, she finds her letter in the mailbox, rips it open, and reads. Her face falls.

“Oh,” Sergei says. “Kate, I’m—”

“I’m gonna kick your asses at the PEE.”

Kate grins, and we laugh and cheer at how she played us. Sergei and I rush out of the car and hug her. I glance back to see Sergei’s jalopy beginning to roll away. Of course Sergei left it in neutral. I yell at him, and he gets in and stops it before it can go very far. We all laugh, and knowing Kate could get in, too, makes this all feel a little more exciting. I pull my phone out and begin to dial Clara’s number before I remember. I stop before I hit SEND, put my phone away, and when I look back at Sergei and Kate to continue celebrating, my smile is a little more fake.

## Chapter 15

When I come home and show my parents my letter, they hug me so hard I think I might suffocate. I get to choose a place for us to eat dinner that night, and my grounding is temporarily lifted so I can go to Sergei's house to study with him and Kate. His parents give us permission to stay through Friday, so Kate and I pack bags and on Thursday morning — sharp and early at eight — Sergei shows up at my front door to pick me up, Kate already asleep in the backseat of his car. I kiss my parents goodbye, they tell me to call if I have any questions or want any tips (it shocks me that they somehow have not given me all of them considering the hours-long conversation we had at dinner last night), and I leave.

We arrive at Sergei's, and a huge grin spreads over my face. I love getting to go inside his house. It's such a strange place, what many in the neighborhood call an eyesore, but I've always found it just plain awesome the way it shoots six stories into the air. The sun reflects off the glass-encircled top floor, and I'm sure Sergei's father is in there already, working on his next architecture pet project.

"You guys will be fine staying in the guest room, yeah?" asks Sergei, heading towards the black column that forms the epicenter of the room.

He presses a silver button to the right of the shadow, and after a few seconds, a section of the black column slides away to reveal the inside of an elevator. We all step in and Sergei presses the button for floor three. The elevator rises as smoothly as ever, and we come out into a small room with a single door in front of us, stairs leading down to the left of it and stairs leading up to the right. Sergei opens the door for us, and once inside, Kate and I set our bags on the plush blue carpet.

“Wow, Sergei. How come we’ve never been able to stay in this room before? It’s swank as hell.”

Kate jumps face-first onto the closer of the two queen-sized beds, landing with a muffled *thump*.

“Well, you guys haven’t really stayed over for four years, and when we were kids, it was easier for us to just stay in my room.”

“Has it really been four years?” I ask.

“I think so. We’re usually at yours or Kate’s place.”

This room has its own television and lounge set, a desk, two dressers, and an entrance to a full bath in the back. It’s like having our own huge hotel room. Sergei allows Kate and me a couple minutes to sort out our clothes and pick out the study materials we’ve brought from home. The Jacksons have a pretty extensive script collection, but Kate and I had a few oddballs that had eluded them, so we brought them with us.

Once we’re unpacked, we head back to the first floor entertainment room. I was looking forward to being off of school for a couple of days, but when Sergei wheels out a whiteboard from the closet, I realized I’d *much* rather be in class.

“All right,” says Sergei. “I talked to my dad about what we should expect. Audrey, I expect your parents did, too? They made it to the PEE?”

I bite back a giggle and nod.

“Great. You can add anything if I miss it. So, Friday night we will go through a routine physical to assess our health, and then we will be assigned a genre to adapt to outside of horror, and we’ll actually be temporarily transferred to that genre on Saturday morning, where we will have to thrive until Sunday night. This means we have some basic genres to look at.”

He writes a few categories on the board: Action-Adventure, Romance, Drama, Comedy. Sci-Fi/Fantasy.

“We’ll be thrust into one of these main genres, and the Writers will add whatever subgenres that they like. We won’t know what medium we’re in, either, until we arrive and are able to assess our situations. But these are the first things we need to figure out.”

I would like to say that Sergei drones on about this for the next two hours, but the truth is that he doesn’t drone. His speech is constantly tense and impassioned, and even if I’m bored — it’s a lot of the same stuff I talked to my parents about or that we learned in school — I can’t help but listen as he goes through how to identify medium, genre, subgenre, and authorial intent.

“The important thing isn’t just to appease the Writer. It’s to understand where They are writing you and to then follow through, implementing your own style and bending the tropes of the world to make your story more interesting. Instead of using our usual diffusement techniques to extinguish a situation, we’ll need to use genre-switch or embracement to keep the story going in an interesting way. In this way, you’ll almost be *becoming* a Writer.”

The very notion makes me feel sick. I finger Clara’s locket at my throat, sliding my thumb across the smooth gold.

“The Writers are probably going to assign us to the genre most different from our personalities so that we can prove our adaptability. So let’s try and figure out what our most opposite genre is. I guess we can start with me. Given my personality, I think I’ll be in—”

“Comedy,” Kate and I say in unison.

Sergei’s jaw drops. “What? No! Action-Adventure.”

“No, it’s definitely going to be comedy. You’re too serious, and you’d fit in too well with AA.”

“But I’m funny.”

Kate grimaces. “Are you?”

We giggle at Sergei’s offended expression, watching his dark cheeks brighten with a blush.

“You can be funny, Sergei, you’re just not a humorous guy,” I say. “You take the world and everything in it very seriously, and you’re very stoic. If we’re looking at those categories, then Comedy contradicts you the most.”

He frowns and looks back and forth between me and the board. Reluctantly, he signs his initials next to Comedy.

“I still think AA,” he mumbles. “All right, Kate, your turn. Where do you not fit in?”

We spend a long time trying to sort her. She’s such a gentle and kind person, she could fit in anywhere. We eventually sort her into either AA or Romance. Then it comes to me, and we run into the same issue.

“They might put you in romance because of the gay thing,” Kate says. “Also, given your recent history, they’d probably see it as good set-up.”

“But she’s pretty romantic,” says Sergei. “Maybe drama? You can be serious, but you hate melodrama, and you usually use diffusement techniques when you’re trying to get out of a situation, which leads to you being silly.”

We end up putting my initials next to both genres. Sergei assigns us scripts to watch or play or read, and we take turns using the television to watch or play a script, the others reading or studying our notes from class. When Sergei’s mom comes home from work — she’s partner at a corporate law firm — we give her only fleeting acknowledgments, too wrapped up in our studies. Sergei is good enough to at least get up and hug her so she can congratulate him. She

tells us dinner will be in about an hour, and my growling stomach is glad to hear that. The sandwiches Sergei made us for lunch were nowhere near filling.

At dinner (held in the second floor dining room), Sergei's mother and father give us a few general tips, then it's back to studying in the living room. We stay up until nearly four before Kate and I are falling asleep in front of the television. Sergei ushers us to bed and sleep couldn't have lasted long enough. Knocking on our door, he wakes us at nine, and when we complain, he tells us he was generous in giving us five hours.

And so the day proceeds like the one before. Studying, eating, studying, studying, studying. The notebook I use for Lifestyles fills with the notes I take on romance and drama tropes I notice through interacting with the sacred scripts. I almost fall asleep around midday, but Sergei provides us with pots of coffee to ensure we can stay up past eight tonight even while running on so little sleep. At six pm, his father loads us into his car and we make the ride to the Salem headquarters.

On Facebook, half of the people in my friends list have wished me luck, some posting on my wall while others messaged me privately. Harry messages the group chat with us, Sergei, and Kate just after we leave town to tell us good luck.

Kate [6:06PM]: Thanks! Wish you'd come to help us study, though. :(

My parents call me, and I talk to them briefly, listening to their words of encouragement as I finger the locket hanging from around my neck.

"You're going to do great, sweetie," says Mother. "Better than your father and I did. We'll pick you up Sunday night. They're releasing you at about eight, right?"

Once I finish my call, we spend most of the car ride in tense silence, punctuated by Sergei flipping viciously through his stuffed book of notes. The traffic is pretty rough into Salem at this time, and we don't get there until 7:03PM. Sergei's father pulls into the circle drive and gets out to hug his son and wish all of us good luck. A steady stream of people file into the headquarters, and we get in line and join them.

"This is it," Sergei says. He clenches and unclenches his fists at his side.

"Are you okay?" I ask. "You look like you're going to be sick."

"I may throw up before we get in there."

"Well, please do it in the grass."

Kate pats him on the shoulder. "You have nothing to worry about. You're a minority and you're top of the class. You're going to great, no matter where they throw you in."

It takes another half-hour to get inside, and from there, we must go to a row of tables sorted by last name.

"Think we'll have to split up here," Kate says. She hugs me tightly, then hugs Sergei. "Good luck, guys. We're going to rock it."

She leaves for the line labeled "T - Z." I turn to Sergei, and he still looks upset. He dressed well for this today, stylish but casual. Even if he looks horribly nauseous, at least his clothes and hair look great.

"You're going to be fine," I tell him, putting both my hands on his shoulders. "I swear."

"You're really going to try to make it, right?" he asks. "You're not just doing this to appease me or your parents?"

"Go big or go home, right?"

He smiles. "I'll see you on the other side, then?"



“You bet.”

We hug, and he walks off to the line for J names and I find myself in a shorter line beside his. When I reach the front, the woman behind the table — sharply dressed and made up — takes my name and hands me a packet of papers.

“You’ll be sitting in section B, so once you enter the ballroom, find that section and take a seat. It’s very important that you sit in the correct section. Failure to do so will result in your expulsion from the PEE.” She waves me away. “Next!”

Chapter 16

I'm ushered by people in suits into a ballroom to the right of the foyer. The place looks newly scrubbed, every inch of it glistening. A hundred chairs fill up the small midsection of the ballroom and face a stage, and I locate the section marked B and find a good place to sit near the middle. I check my phone to find messages from the group.

Kate [7:38PM]: What section did you guys get? I'm in C.

Me [7:41PM]: b

Kate [7:41PM]: We must be divided by genre.

Me [7:41PM]: probably

Sergei [7:42PM]: im in e.

Harry [7:42PM]: so ur all in different genres?

Kate [7:42PM]: I think so.

I put my phone in my purse and look around. The place looks so empty with so few people in it. There can't be more than a hundred people invited here to apply, so the section of the ballroom we take up is minuscule. A guy takes a seat next to me, and I smile at him.

"Hey, nice to meet you," I say, offering my hand out to him. "I'm Audrey."

He looks from me to my hand with a raised eyebrow.

"I don't associate with the competition," he says and focuses his attention on the stage.

I raise my brows. "Oh-kay," I mutter. I wonder if this is the type of person most likely to be invited here. I message the group for the remainder of the time. At exactly eight o' clock, the doors to the ballroom shut. I look just in time to see the shocked faces of two kids in line to check-in. When the doors close, there's a moment before I can hear shouting behind those doors. Well, the letter said to be checked in before eight. Maybe not getting involved with this will be

better for them. The ballroom quiets and we all listen to those poor people who showed up too late to be let inside yell and go quiet. I chew on my lip and turn to the stage.

A woman comes on stage, her brown hair pinned up in a delicate bun. She looks striking in a suit, though maybe that's just my little gay heart getting excited, and her very appearance is enough to silent the gathered crowd.

"Thank you to everyone who was able to join us on time," she says. "We here at the Horror branch of the Association of Exceptional Characters would like to welcome and congratulate all of you on making it to the Physical and Emotional Examination section of our application process. Tonight, you will get to experience something most of your peers never will: the exploration of another genre.

"The PEE is meant to assess your physical and mental fortitude as well as your skills adapting to a new environment while still producing a quality story. All of you will be protagonists this weekend, whether that be in a film, a novel, a video game or some other medium of the Writers' choosing. Literary Writers will be in charge of your stories this weekend, and it will be up to you to prove to them and those of us watching that you are capable of making remarkable stories centered on yourselves, that you are not constrained to the conventions of the genre in which you were born.

"You will have a physical examination before that, but let us first hear a few words from tonight's special guest: Jonathon Crein."

My nails drag against my jeans as I ball my hands into fists atop my thighs. The person who first walks on stage, however, is not Crein, but his editor, that man with the strange face neither ugly nor beautiful. The cheering comes for him in full-force, and he doesn't seem the

awkward dude I met the other day. Realization hits me full in the chest, and I feel sick at knowing that I even brushed his fingers with mine.

“Thank you for the warm applause, and welcome again,” he says, quieting the crowd. “It’s great to have all of you here. As residents of North America, we’re lucky we get to meet in the Horror capital that is Salem. Salem’s history is rich with stories both genre-based and literary-based. It is a diverse—” I snort when he says that. *Yeah, if you call white pilgrims and savage native tropes “diverse.”* “—city that allows for true exploration of the soul and our inner demons.

“I was just recently invited to join the League of Literary Authors, and so I’m happy to induct you into the upcoming challenge. This will be my first chance to write under their tutelage, and it is an honor. These Writers know better than anyone else what it means to delve into the machinations of the soul, and this weekend, all of us will experience a new kind of living in a new environment.

“As you go forward this weekend, I advise you to be true to yourselves and your spirits. Do not rely on the tricks that have allowed you to survive thus far. Instead, rely on what feels right. Listen to the Writers’ hints of where to go, follow them, and show them something they’ve never seen before. Those of you who will be inducted will be seen as the cream of the crop, but all of you here have proven you potential. All of your stories are worth being told, and I am excited to see where they will go this weekend.

“With all of that said, please welcome back to the stage Diana Loeb. Good luck to all of you.”

The crowd applauds him, but I do not. I watch him exit the stage, continuing to stare even after he’s disappeared behind a curtain. If I could find a way to get to him—

“Thank you, Mr. Crein,” says Diana. I was too focused on Crein to see her return to the stage. “In just a moment, you will be escorted to your testing room based on your seating arrangements. When you arrive at your testing room, you’ll first be given a brief overall physical examination before you are allowed to continue. Your goal in the PEE is to show yourself capable of extraordinary stories through your own characterization. Please keep that in mind. Without further ado, we’ll now dismiss section A. Please follow your section leaders to the assessment facility.”

Section A rises and is herded out the doors by two suited workers. Low chatter hums throughout the room, and I look back to the curtain where I last saw Crein. He must still be in here somewhere, right?

Once section A has been completely evacuated, section B is called, and we rise. I follow my group carefully, eying the closest guards ushering us on our way. Once we’re out in the hall, I allow myself to slip towards the edge of the group. We take the stairs in the foyer to the second-floor landing, and I continue to drift backward in the group until I’m at the tail end. The group turns left, and I wait until I see the rear guard distracted to slip out, making my way down the right-side path. I round the corner so that those on the first floor can’t see me and release a sigh of relief.

I don’t know what I plan to do with Crein when I catch him — kill him, maybe, but who knows if that can even be done. Maybe I could get him to write Clara back into the story. This hall is dimly lit by wall-mounted lanterns and a single huge window at the end of it. As I walk towards the end, more paths branch out to my right. Where should I even go?

I turn a corner and stumble back when I run into something. I squeak in surprise, and once I’ve reeled back, I see I’ve run into an older man in a suit.

“Oh, sorry,” I say. “Excuse me.”

I try to walk past him, but he grabs my arm and pulls me back.

“What are you doing separate from your group?” he asks, nodding to the folder of papers in my hand. “Shouldn’t you be heading to the testing facilities?”

“Yeah,” I say, “but I was actually trying to find a bathroom.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You can’t hold it?”

I rub the back of my neck and look at the ground.

“Well, you see, it’s not really about *going* to the bathroom. I’m having, well, I think my *woman issues* started during the introduction speeches, and I didn’t bring a change of pants...”

His hand snaps away from me like I’m diseased, and when I look up, his cheeks are flushed a deep red.

“Well, there’s a bathroom attached to the testing facilities,” he says, stumbling through the words.

“I’d really prefer if I didn’t bleed everywhere, though, sir. I mean, it flows out of me like the blood elevators in *The Shining*—”

“I’m sorry, I can’t let you!” he shouts over me. His entire face is red now, showing even under his thin, white hair. “Now, come along. I’ll escort you to your testing facility’s restroom.”

Damn. That’s never failed to work before. Men always get so flustered when you start talking about your period, and I’ve always used that as a way to get out of trouble before. I have no choice but to tell him which group I’m with, and he leads me at arm’s length back through the halls. We come to the second-floor landing in the lobby, and the staff is packing up the tables and papers from the check-in process. We cross to the left-side hallway, wind through a couple dimly lit corridors decorated with antique rugs and frowning portraits, then descend into another

lobby, probably that of one of the other mansions connected to the main entrance. He leads me to the entrance of another ballroom, where another person in a suit stands at attention.

“I found this one had wandered away from her group in search of a restroom,” the man who caught me says to the attendant. “She needs to go immediately.”

He quickly walks away before anything else can be said. The attendant and I look at each other, and I shrug.

“He seemed very upset about my period,” I say, and he gives a quiet, awkward chuckle.

“Well, you came in just as they’re wrapping up the physical. You can get in the back of that line over there, let them look you over real quick, and then there’s a fifteen minute break to allow for using the restroom. Door’s over in that corner.” He gestures to the left side of the room.

I thank him and walk inside, blown away by how this ballroom’s aesthetic is so different from the other. It’s hard to tell the size, part of it cut off with tall white dividers. I get in the very short line — only two people in front of me — and wait patiently as the ones before me are called into small, curtained off cubicles. When it’s my turn, the exam is just as routine as described. In one of the cubicles, a nurse checks my weight, height, blood pressure, number of scars, curse levels, and luck before sending me to the other side of the white dividers. I find that this ballroom is significantly smaller than the previous one, as there’s just enough room for about two dozen beds here. All of the white here is nearly blinding. White walls, white tile, and the sheets of the single-person cots filling the room, each adorned with a red sign at the foot with a person’s name, are white as well. An end table sits next to each bed with nothing more on it than a glass of water. Most people seem to have found their assigned beds, and I sigh and start wandering to find my own. They are organized by last name, at least, and I find my bed situated

between “Ellison” and “Franco.” Both my neighbors have arrived and sit on top of their cots, so I do the same. I look towards Franco, a sweet-looking girl with big brown eyes.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” I say, getting the girl’s attention. “I was having period issues, so I didn’t get to hear the directions for all of this. Did I miss any important info?”

“Yowch, that’s inconvenient,” she says. “They just told us that we’re in Drama. You didn’t miss any instructions, though. Don’t worry. As long as you went through the physical eval?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Then you’re all good.” She smiles. “Is this your first try?”

“First and only.”

“Wow, you’re confident,” she says, though there’s no menace in her voice.

I laugh. “No, not exactly. Just not willing to go through all of this again if I don’t make it.”

She laughs, too, and nods.

“Understandable.”

“Is this *your* first time?”

“Third.”

My eyes widen and I look her over again. There’s no way she’s older than me. She has a cherubic, round face, and though she’s reclining in her bed, I can tell she’s pretty short.

“How old are you?” I blush at my own accusatory tone. “Sorry, I’m just — you don’t look old enough to have tried for this three times.”

She laughs. “It’s all right. I’m actually twenty, but I was invited to apply once when I was really young and not at all ready and then again right before the end of high school.”



“Did you get this far both times?”

“I did the application in third grade, but my parents didn’t want me going any further than that. I went through this part in high school and got accepted, but I wasn’t quite ready for it. Now, though, *now* I’m ready.”

“That’s so impressive. I’d wish you luck, but it doesn’t sound like you need it.” She laughs. “Can you offer a rookie any advice?”

“Just stay true to yourself. That’s all I’d say.”

“*Testing Section B, please recline on your cots and prepare for immersion,*” rattles a voice on some unseen intercom.

“Good luck, Ericson!” says the girl as she slides underneath her covers. “Hope to see you in the Club.”

I follow her lead and slide underneath my own covers. The voice instructs us to drink the entire glass of water on the end table beside our bed. We’re told it contains a compound that will allow us to switch genres. I try not to think of suicide cults while I down the glass.

“*The test will commence three seconds from your finishing the last sip of water,*” says the intercom voice. I hit the last bit of water in my glass, and the intercom is right. Three seconds later, I’m knocked out.

PART 03

## Chapter 17

The early sun's rays shone through the window, casting slivers of sanguine light across Audrey's sleeping face. She closed her eyes tightly against the irritant and turned to her side. Before she could fall back into blissful sleep, a maid's gentle voice whispered in her ear, "It is time to rise, Miss."

After rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Audrey sat up and glanced around the illustrious room. It was like no place she had ever slept before, except maybe its richness was matched by Sergei's home. The morning light made the yellow wallpaper<sup>22</sup> appear orange, the flowers painted there transforming into tufts of flame. A young woman flitted about the room, dragging the thick curtains open further so that the sun could shine full-force into the bedroom and illuminate the dust motes hanging in the air. Her footsteps were light and imperceptibly quiet whether she stepped upon the crimson rug or the honey-hued floorboards.

"It's an important day for my young mistress," said the maid. She came to Audrey's side and helped her dazed lady from the bed. "You must be looking forward to it."

Immediately, Audrey knew what this day was — it was the day she would meet the man who might become her betrothed, Mr. William Coleridge. She did not know how she knew this, but it came to her instantly. She looked down at herself in her nightgown, and then up at her maid, whose face was at once both familiar and strange.

"I am," Audrey said. She bit back the shock of her own voice, which formed its words in a high-class British tongue. "You will help me dress, won't you, Maryanne?" The servant's name had come to her as suddenly as Mr. Coleridge's had.

"Eager as ever, I see."

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<sup>22</sup> Reference to "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gillman, a Gothic feminist short story from 1892.

The process of preparing for the day took longer than Audrey would have ever imagined. She had never worn as many layers as she did now, at least not in her real life, which she was glad to still be able to distinguish from this new one into which she had been tossed.

When she finally had readied herself to face the day, Kate led her downstairs to the dining room, where the rest of the household had already begun breakfasting on bread and jam and eggs. An older man sat on one end of the table, an older woman opposite him, and she recognized them to be her parents of this world. They were not the parents of her home, however, but she knew instinctively that in this story, these were the roles of these characters. Another young woman, younger than herself, sat at the table, dressed almost as finely as Audrey herself. The young girl — her name was Laura, she felt — looked up as Audrey entered, and a polite smile broke across her face.

“Good morning,” Audrey said. She walked to Laura, her sister, and kissed the top of her head before taking the seat beside her.

“Good morning, Elizabeth,” said her father.

Audrey looked at him, suddenly hit with the realization that she was not herself at all. She looked down at her hands and noticed her skin paler than she it had ever been before, her flesh smooth rather than roughened by years of boxing, nails delicately filed and manicured. She was not herself, not even in body. She and her friends of her world had wondered how the new worlds would welcome them — would they be as they had always been, filled with familiar faces in similar roles, or would they be crafted anew? No amount of reading had been able to grant them a clear answer, and Audrey now understood why. She was both herself and not herself. The mind of her true life resided in this body, but with the memory of this person, crafted from air by a Writer or taken over by Audrey’s insertion, in stride with her old mind. She

had filled a vessel that had served an ordinary life until this moment, and now she was to act her way through the story.

“Good morning, Father,” she said.

“Are you excited for this afternoon?”

She looked down at her plate as it was laid before her and focused on the bright yolk of her egg rather than her father’s discerning face.

“Yes,” she said. “It should be lovely. It’ll be a pleasure to finally meet Mr. Coleridge.”

“I agree. He’s a wonderful match for you, Eliza, and should he propose, you’ll bring a great deal of respect to our family. His name is as old as the dirt itself.”

“Don’t be so crass, Harry,” warned her mother.

“Apologies. Still, the sentiment stands.”

They enjoyed breakfast with little more talking. Afterward, they took up in the parlor and Audrey found Elizabeth’s drawing book near an art easel, the sight of which made Audrey sick. She pushed that aside and sat on a lounge so that she would not have to look at the horrid thing. Within Elizabeth’s art book were dozens of beautiful sketches, most of which were of the same young woman — beautiful, Grecian in the forms and planes of her face. The name *CLAIRE* blazed itself into her mind.

With a force that drew the attention of her family, she slammed the drawing book shut. She felt flushed, lightheaded. What kind of cruel joke was this, she wondered. This could not be happenstance. Whoever was writing her story now knew of her past traumas and pains, and They were using them purposefully against her.

Before anyone could question her, a maid entered the parlor and looked to her.

“Miss Elizabeth, Miss Claire Scott is in the foyer. She has requested to speak with you.”

Audrey began to rise, but stopped herself just as her hands pressed the edges of her chair.

“May I be excused, Father?”

At his nod, she rose quickly and followed the servant to the entrance hall. Her heart beat wildly in her chest, and she did not know what she should expect. The woman in Elizabeth’s drawings did not look like her Clara, but a Writer could make anything true...

It was not Clara who stood in the foyer, but the woman of the drawings. Her raven black hair was gathered into a bun behind her head in beautiful Psyche knots, a few strands of which had pulled away and lay curled around her face. Her eyes, though, were the same striking blue of noonday skies that Clara’s had once been. Audrey paused in the arch leading from the hallway to the foyer, breath caught in her lungs as Claire Scott turned to greet her.

“Oh, it’s been too long, Lizzy,” she said.

They met in the middle and shared kisses on the cheek.

“Yes, far too long,” said Audrey, the words barely able to escape her lips. She took a moment to gather herself and said to her servant, “Claire and I will be taking a walk around the garden should anyone need us.”

Without further ado, Claire took Audrey’s arm and they walked through to the back of the house and out into the backyard. A stone path led out into a beautifully flowered garden, and once the two young ladies became enshrouded in shrubbery, Claire turned with a devilish smile to Audrey.

“So, when should I expect a wedding?” she asked.

Audrey blushed and shook her head. She realized then that this might now be her chance. She had not been sent here to create a typical Victorian drama. She had been sent here to create something new, innovative. Whoever had relegated her here, she realized, had already laid down

the clues for what she should do, and it was up to her to follow through. Sickness rose in her throat, brought on by the deep pang of sorrow that this task bestowed upon her. She hated to follow the cues of the Writers, but if she wanted access to Mr. Jonathon Crein, she must follow through.

Audrey bit down her disgust and forced herself to speak.

“I don’t believe I will be getting married,” she said. “Certainly not to Mr. Coleridge.”

“Oh, Lizzy, why not? He’s so well-endowed, and I’m sure you’ll find him a perfect gentleman.”

“Haven’t you heard the rumors circling about him?” Audrey asked. “It’s rumored he murdered his first wife for her inheritance.”

“Oh, you know that’s all a lot of slander,” Claire cried.

“It could be. I had heard that his father gambled away all of the family’s money, and now they’ve been left penniless.”

“Even if that were true, Mr. Coleridge has proven himself very respectable in society. I’ve met him once, I told you. He was the perfect gentleman.”

As the words rolled out of her, Audrey realized the importance of these hints. Foreshadowing, most definitely. She didn’t see how she would end up married to this man in just twenty-four hours, but it would be wise to be on the lookout for any murderous intent just in case. Perhaps she was not meant to service the entire story, only a part of it, and she would loathe to set poor Elizabeth up for tragedy.

“Well, I believe there may be another reason I do not wish to wed,” Audrey said. “Here, let us sit a moment.”

She led Claire to a bench flanked with bright plumes of wolfs bane, and the two sat side-by-side on the marble. Audrey turned to the dark-haired Claire and pressed their hands together.

“I have a confession to make,” she said.

“You’re in love with someone else.”

Audrey allowed the shock to show on her face. “You know?”

“Why else would you buy into these silly rumors? You’ve always been cautious, but this doesn’t seem to be caution.” She smiled. “So, who is the lucky fellow?”

Audrey blushed, pressing her fingers to one of her warm cheeks. The important thing was to not be too melodramatic here, though this situation mirrored so close to her own circumstances, she wasn’t sure if that would be a problem. Claire, though she looked so different, reminded her so much of her own Clara. She had attitude, though it was never at anyone’s expense, only a gentle poking of fun. She had her smile.

Audrey turned to Claire and took her hand, but as she stared into the woman’s face, a realization dawned upon her. Should she confess for Elizabeth — should she tell Claire the truth that the one she was in love with was *her* — then only one thing could come to pass. *Bury your gays*. It was the trope that guaranteed the death of at least half a couple. It was the trope that had taken Clara away from her. Should she speak the truth now, it would end in either Claire’s or Elizabeth’s death. There seemed no other option.

“You must promise not to be angry with me,” Audrey implored.

“Well, I don’t know if I can promise that, but go ahead and tell me.”

Audrey trained the emotion out of her face.

“It is your husband, Robert.”

Claire tore her hand from Audrey’s grasp. Audrey forced a smile, and she looked away.



“I know he means so much to you,” she said, “but I just can’t help myself. I believe he’s in love with me, too. I plan on confessing to him, soon, and asking him to leave you. I’m sure he’ll give you a decent payment for the divorce. Neither of us would want you to be left in poverty.”

“This is a cruel joke,” whispered Claire.

“It is no joke. It is the truth.”

Claire covered her face with her hands, her shoulders quivering with tears. Audrey continued to speak.

“Still, I thought it best to tell you before I told him. You can’t change my mind, but at least now his request will not come as a complete surprise.”

Claire rose before she could finish speaking. When they matched each other’s gazes, it took all of Audrey’s strength not to break her act. She hadn’t been sure what Claire’s reaction would have been to a confession of homoerotic love. Claire would have either confessed her mutual attraction or laughed in Audrey’s face. The former would have created the path to a tragic end—a murder, a shot through the heart by a jealous man, a disease sent down by God. The latter would have broken Elizabeth’s spirit and perhaps led her to suicide. This way, at least, Audrey controlled the tragedy. Elizabeth’s memories told her that Claire’s husband certainly did find her attractive, but whether that was enough to get him to divorce Claire, she did not know. But whether Claire loved her or her own husband, this confession should be enough to break their bonds of friendship and ensure that even if their hearts broke, no one would have to die for the sake of drama.

Claire turned and left without a word, running out of the garden with her skirt hiked up so she wouldn’t fall. Audrey stared after her, then allowed her self-satisfied smile to fall. There was

one problem taken care of. It was probably not what the Writers wanted, but Audrey could not have, in good conscience, doomed them to die. Confession would have been a guaranteed death; this was only guaranteed heartbreak.

## Chapter 18

Audrey knew she had been meant to confess to Claire that she was in love with her; the Writers wouldn't have given her someone so close in name and personality if she hadn't been. So with that botched, she'd have to make up something better if she wished to make it into the Association of Exceptional Characters. It hadn't been hard not to be melodramatic with Claire; it reminded her too much of realities she'd feared coming true in her own life. But with this Coleridge character approaching, she realized she'd have a much harder time keeping herself appropriate.

Audrey walked back to the house and let herself inside. When she returned to the parlor, her parents barely spared her a glance.

"Where is Claire?" asked her sister. "Is she not visiting with us?"

Audrey shook her head. "She was on her way to the city when she stopped by. She simply wanted to wish me luck in courting Mr. Coleridge."

She found her way back to her drawing book and opened it. Perhaps she could turn this into the story of a broken heart. Drama often had elements of Romance in it, but she would need to keep this rooted in the Drama genre if she wanted to ensure she'd pass. Without the homoerotic subplot, she'd need something else to add to this story and craft it into something interesting.

As she looked back through her sketches, she tried to list possible dramatic turns in her head. Murder was always an option, but not something she really wanted to go through with. It could also too easily become melodrama. She certainly couldn't embrace her affection for Claire; that would just lead to despair for both of them. With only approximately twenty-four total hours to be here, it also meant she only had about half a day to set something up for this story that

would create drama in a new, dynamic way — while protecting Elizabeth and Claire at the same time.

She looked through her drawings until another servant arrived to tell them that Mr. Coleridge had arrived. The family grew excited, and Audrey feigned her own excitement. Her father left to meet Coleridge in the foyer, then returned soon after. Audrey bit back laughter when she saw the man who would try to marry her. Nothing about him told it to her. He looked the average gentleman, well-groomed and well-polished. He had a simple, handsome face, and he seemed only a few years older than she. But she knew, looking at him, from some deeply ingrained instinct — Coleridge was a homosexual.

“Mr. Coleridge, this is my daughter, Elizabeth,” said her father.

Audrey rose from the lounge and crossed the room to meet him. She started to stick her hand out to shake his hand but remembered her time and place and fell into a curtsy.

“Such a pleasure to meet you,” she said, the joy bubbling in her words.

He took her right hand, bowed, and kissed her knuckles.

“It is a pleasure to meet you as well, Miss.”

“Thank you for coming. We were hoping to go for a ride once you arrived. Would you like to?”

An hour later, Elizabeth’s parents, herself, and Mr. Coleridge were mounted and starting their ride into the countryside. Audrey and Coleridge trotted a dozen yards ahead of her parents, sharing a forgettable conversation about their interests. When the conversation lulled, she glanced back at her parents to ensure they were far enough away not to hear them, and she turned back to Coleridge.

“I know why you killed your late wife,” she said.

Surprise barely registered on his face, and he laughed, crinkling his mustache.

“Ah, that silly rumor again, hm?” he said. “What are they claiming about me this time?”

“*They* are claiming nothing. It is only me. I am going to tell you what I think. When I am finished, you can tell me what I got wrong,” she said. “You married your late wife partially because she was very wealthy. As the head of the family, it was your responsibility to marry and replenish the funds that your father has wasted on gambling. You married Miss Ramseyer, and with the small funds you received from her family, you hoped to reform your house and get it back on the financial track. You actually didn’t mind her company, but then she discovered your secret.”

Audrey glanced at Mr. Coleridge. The day was crisp and the sun only vaguely warm, but a bead of sweat rolled down his forehead. They came out onto a field of rye, and a wind kicked up, rustling the plants into golden waves. She continued.

“She learned that you enjoyed the company of other men. She was infuriated, disgusted. She threatened to tell everyone and to divorce you. You knew if that happened, you would be sent to death. Likely, she found some evidence of this — love letters or walking in on you in the act. Whatever it was, you knew you would die should she tell anyone. So you pushed her down the stairs to protect yourself, and I’m sure you didn’t mind the inheritance you received from her death, either. But it has been a couple of years since then, you’re out of mourning, and there is some pressure on you to find another wife. Perhaps you’re on the verge of being found out again — by someone other than me, that is.”

Coleridge had gone pale. He gripped the reins of his horse tightly, and he stared straight ahead, not daring to look at the woman beside him.

“That’s a lie,” he said, but it came out choked. “I would — to think of such a thing is disgusting. I don’t know where you got these abhorrent ideas, but if you think—”

“I know you enjoy the company of men in the way that a woman does,” she said, “because I enjoy the company of women in the way that a man does.”

She held back a smile at the look of shock on his face.

“That’s a bold statement to make, but it means nothing. That’s simply how women are. They love each other.”

“Just gals being pals, huh?”<sup>23</sup> Audrey said and quickly regretted it. Jokes — the exact things she was *not* supposed to do. And the joke wasn’t even period-relevant. She cleared her throat and took back up her haughty accent. “I have done things with women that you would never have thought to do with your late wife. I swear to you, we are the same. It is true that I have much less to fear from the law than you — no one has ever heard of a woman being punished for loving another woman. Still, knowing your circumstances, I would be inclined to help you. I must marry, anyway, and I’d prefer it to be to a man who is as much disinclined to engage with me physically as I am disinclined to engage with him.”

“I’m not — one of *those*,” he hissed through his teeth. “That’s sinful. I’d never in my life—”

“Ignore me if you’d like. I won’t tell anyone. Should you decide to pursue someone else for marriage, you may do so. But if you’d like a wife who is sure to understand you — and allow you to do as you wish — then I would gladly accept. As you can see from our estate, my family is also wealthy. The dowry alone would be enough to clear the new debts I’m sure your father has accumulated.”

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<sup>23</sup> There are many modern jokes centered on female/female couples that are often perceived as just friendships, no matter how romantic or sexual the couple is, and they are usually referred to as “gal pals.”

They made the rest of the ride in silence. Occasionally, Audrey sneaked a glance at him and found that the anger had washed away from his face, leaving only contemplation and a bit of fear. Nearly an hour passed before they arrived back at the manor. Coleridge quickly dismounted his horse and aided Audrey in dismounting her own. When her parents had dismounted, her father invited Coleridge for tea in the garden, and he agreed.

It was as if their conversation had never taken place. During tea, Coleridge acted the gentleman and doted on Audrey every chance he got. She could tell her parents were impressed by him, and as the afternoon drew on, he grew warmer. It wasn't until dusk that he stated he needed to leave, and the carriage that had brought him prepared itself for the journey back to his home. Audrey told her parents she would escort Mr. Coleridge out, and they gave him heartfelt goodbyes to send him off. Audrey took his arm and leaned in closely as they walked.

"Have you given my proposition thought?" she asked.

He stopped a few feet away from the carriage and turned to her. He wore his own face like a mask, letting no emotion pass it that he did not wish to be seen. Now that she had played her trump card, she could say no more to surprise him, and thus he would not allow his emotions to get the better of him once more and betray the truth.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Elizabeth," he said. He bowed, took her hand, and kissed her knuckles. "I hope that I will see you again soon."

She smiled, and when he released her hand, she curtsied.

"I will wait with bated breath, sir," she said with as much irony as she could muster.

She watched until the carriage disappeared over the horizon dusted orange from the setting sun. The wind fluttered the loose curls of her hair, and she clutched her hands before her

as in a prayer. When the sun grew too dim, a servant came out to greet her and ensure her health. She thanked him for his concern and returned inside.

The conversation at dinner was lively.

“He’s a wonderful boy,” said her mother.

“Absolutely,” said her father. “I wasn’t sure what to think of him at first. There are so many conflicting rumors floating about. But, certainly, he’s a fine young man. A fine young man.”

Elizabeth’s sister asked Audrey questions about how she felt about Mr. Coleridge, if she was in love with him, if she wished for the marriage.

“Oh, I don’t think I love him just yet,” she said, “but I do believe I am on my way to it.”

Audrey found herself at Elizabeth’s writing desk that night. The moon was full tonight and the sky clear. The light that shone through her window cast everything into a milky glow. She found another drawing pad tucked into a secret drawer in her desk. Upon opening it, she found sketches of naked women filled it — women who certainly weren’t Claire, perhaps past loves of Elizabeth. She found an empty page and began to sketch from memory, wondering if she could bring her own love to life. Clara became the only clothed sketch in the entire book, and Elizabeth’s skill allowed her to get all the finest details into the drawing. Sometimes as she was finishing the details on a fancied, period-appropriate dress, Audrey fell asleep atop her drawing pad.



Chapter 19

I wake up in the same bed I went to sleep in at the Association of Exceptional Characters. It looks like it's morning — Sunday morning, I guess. When I look around, most of the beds are still filled with sleeping applicants. The girl I'd talked to before, Franco, is still asleep, and I hope she did well. I'm sure she did. An attendant comes to me when he sees I've waken. Just as the workers were yesterday, they are dressed in suits and formal clothing.

"Audrey Ericson?" asks the man, a clipboard tucked under his arm.

"Audrey," I correct.

He didn't say anything in response. He pulled out his clipboard and flipped through it until he apparently found my name.

"You're all checked off. If you leave the ballroom the way you came, you can go to the dining hall across the way where breakfast is being held. You're free to spend as much time there as you would like until your interview at eleven-thirty. Meet in the foyer promptly at eleven-twenty-five to be taken to your interview site. After your interview, you'll be escorted back to the dining hall for lunch, and you will remain there until every participant has been interviewed and the final decisions for induction have been made. Should this last until after five — which it usually does — then you will be served dinner as well. Any questions?"

"Will people from the other genres be in there?"

"Yes," he says. "Now if that's all, you're free to go."

I pull the covers off of me and get out of bed. Most people are still asleep, it seems, but no one's face betrays what might be happening in whatever world they're in. Everyone looks as calm as ever, sleeping peacefully and quietly. There's not even a single snore in the room.

The dividers that had separated one half of the room from the other are gone now, so I'm left to trek through an empty expanse in order to leave. The workers posted at the exit point me across the foyer to the other dining hall, one of the doors cracked open. Workers are posted at the stairs and the dining hall. Even if I had the energy to try, I wouldn't be able to sneak past these people and try to find Crein's office again. Maybe he will be unlucky enough to meet me during the interview.

The ballroom being used for brunch looks more like the one that held the opening announcements. It's more classically styled than its modern counterpart I slept in, even if there are modern lunch tables laid out to fill it. Close to the entrance is a cafeteria line, and while I wait behind a dozen other applicants, I get out my phone. No one else has messaged the group chat, so I guess I must be the first one to wake up. Before I grab a tray, I message a quick, "Just got out. Text when you are."

The food is strictly Americana, but there's a dozen options to accommodate for what I imagine is a diversity of dietary restrictions. I fill my plate with bacon, fruit, and pancakes, then join a cluster of applicants in one of the closer tables. We introduce ourselves, but I forget their names as soon as they say them. Half of them were from Action-Adventure, and the others are scattered from the other genres. We all describe our different experiences in our new worlds, and it's fascinating to hear what they each went through. It seems that no one actually entered the other genres in their own bodies; they simply inhabited another person and had that same inherent knowledge about the life the person had lived as I had about Elizabeth.

"Have you never had that happen to you before?" asked one of the applicants. He'd been sent to Comedy, and he was several years older than the rest of us. "I thought most people experienced that at some point or another."

"I'd heard about it, but I guess I always thought it was ghost possession," said one of the guys from AA.

I nod. "It's crazy thinking someone could just control my life for a few days."

"If the other genres have turnouts like we do, then I'd suppose only about three-thousand people a year are affected by it in Horror? And when you take into account that there are, what, over seven billion people on the planet, then it's easy to understand why no one's really heard about it. Especially when we're not even supposed to talk about it unless we want to get sued or some shit."

I check my phone and see a message from Kate saying she just got out. I text her where I am, and the table and I engage in discussion until she comes and joins us with a heaping plate of food in her hands.

"Hungry?" I ask. She doesn't look good. The flowers she had painted on the side of her head look like ink smudges behind her ear, and there are bags on the bags beneath her eyes.

"It was a rough time, let me tell you," she says. She sits down next to me and leans against my shoulder. "Where'd you get put?"

"Drama," I say. I explain to her what happened, and she gives a soft groan. "That almost sounds fun. I got put in AA, like we thought, and proceeded to basically get the shit kicked out of me for the entire time. I was put in some Bond girl type position, and you know me. I can't be sexy to save my life. So I tried being badass, but I'm also a giant coward, so I kept trying to run from the Russians, would get caught, would lie to them to get them to stop beating me, and then get beat again when they found out I was lying. It was horrible."

"Yikes, dude. Maybe the interview will go better."

"Maybe." She shakes her head. "It's not until two-fifteen. When's yours?"

“Eleven-thirty. It wouldn’t be so bad if we didn’t have to wait around here afterward. I hope they give us some actual stuff to do.”

I check the clock on my phone. It’s a quarter past eleven.

“We got any tips for the interview?” I ask the table.

They’d been in their own conversations, but now they look over at me.

“Make everything you did sound important and concept-shattering,” said the guy who’d been possessed by a test-taker before. “Even if it was mundane. If you explain it like it was something super important, then you should be in good shape.”

We shoot the shit for another few minutes until it’s time for me to head out to the lobby. I find only a couple of other lost-looking kids out there, but when I ask, they say they have eleven-thirty interviews. Only one more person shows up before five-’til, and after checking off our names from a clipboard, a man in a gray, wool suit leads us upstairs and further into the Frankensteinian mansion. One by one, he drops us off in front of different rooms. I’m the last one to be dropped off, the furthest door in our group. We may have even entered one of the other mansions stitched to this housing conglomerate.

“They’ll call you when they’re ready,” says my guide, and I watch him walk back down the hall. Just as he disappears around the corner, the door at my back opens and I turn to look in. A man has opened the door for me, as generic-looking as all the other workers here, and he smiles at me.

“Audrey Ericson?” he asks. I raise my brows in answer, surprised that he pronounced my name correctly. “Come right in.”

The room is quite plain, and the only thing that truly sticks out to me is the other man in the room who holds the same strange imperfections that Jonathon Crein does. They’re not

imperfect in the same ways, but this man is similar in his lack of beauty or ugliness. He more exists as an entity than anything else, neither an object to be coveted nor one to be rejected.

The man who opened the door sits beside the imperfect man, and when I take the seat opposite them, we are separated by only a handful of feet and a simple wooden desk. Each man has a clipboard in front of him, and they're sure to have it tilted towards themselves slightly so that I can't see whatever is written on the papers.

"Audrey, it's nice to meet you," says the man who let me in. "My name is Jared Hill. I'm director of communications for the Association of Exceptional Characters. With me is Arron Fowler, the Writer in charge of the story you engaged with yesterday."

So whatever that strange aura is around Crein and this Fowler guy — it must be a Writer thing. I look back to Hill, trying hard to hide my mistrust of them both. He's very pleasant. I don't trust it for a moment.

"Arron and I will switch off asking you questions about the choices you made yesterday, and we'd just like you to answer them as completely and honestly as possible. Do you have any questions before we get started?" I shake my head. "Wonderful. I'll go ahead and start off. What direction did you think Mr. Fowler had in mind when he injected you into Elizabeth Hughes' story?"

I clasped my hands in my lap. "Well, it seemed obvious that it was meant to have a romance between me — Elizabeth, that is — and Claire. I think Fowler wanted me to confess to Claire when I saw her, and then perhaps I would be rejected or she would have implored me to run off with her. After that, when I met with Coleridge, I think the intention was for me to reject his marriage proposal due to my sexuality, which would have led to conflicts within the family." I bit my lip.

Fowler was the next to speak. “Why did you choose to tell Claire that you were in love with her husband?”

“To protect her.” Perhaps the truth wasn’t where I should have gone right now, but I hadn’t prepared any lies. “I thought that if it were turned into a romance between her and Elizabeth, you would have killed one of them for the sake of drama or symbolism or something. By trying to destroy their relationship, I added drama while taking away some of that danger. They would be upset with each other, but no one would necessarily have to die.”

I watched them scribble onto their papers.

“What about with Mr. Coleridge? Why did you make the decision to enter his confidence?”

“Us queers gotta stick together.” I laugh awkwardly. “But seriously. I figured you’d probably try to pit us against each other. There’s this whole weird idea of rivalry between gay guys and lesbians that I don’t really understand. But given the time period, I figured if there was an option to marry a guy you *knew* was gay, you should sure as hell take it. He gets a beard, you get a purse, and neither of you is going to be upset when you sleep with someone else — unless there’s internalized homophobia, in which case you have a whole other set of issues to deal with.”

Hill asks, “You seemed to have a decent idea of what Mr. Fowler wanted you to do. Why did you choose to go against his wishes rather than embrace them?”

I rub my calloused knuckles.

“Well, for one, I don’t think they deserved to have any of that happen to them. I wanted to see those people make it out of that story in one piece. Maybe get left alone. I know what it’s like to be the protagonist in some fucked up story. I know that Writers love killing gay characters

for some reason. I hoped that what I did would protect them even a little bit,” I say. “And I think what I did still makes for an interesting story. You don’t have to kill anyone just to make things interesting. And even if their happy, it can still be a story worth reading or watching or whatever. Other than that...” I shrug. I can’t even think of a way to lie about this.

More writing. Fowler.

“Why do you want to become part of the Association of Exceptional Characters?”

It’s the same question that was on the written portion. I made it sound sweet on the application, but I don’t know if I’m capable of that now.

“Because I want to reform it,” I say. “I think the way it’s currently run is really crappy. I think that the stories produced are just as generic, and there’s no regard for the lives that are ruined or the characters who die. You ruin lives, and you don’t give a fuck. Then you act like the stories you create are somehow better or more profound than the rest of ours. And that’s just... not right.”

Fowler and Hill look at each other, not bothering to mask their surprise or obvious rejection of me. As I thought, I’m not upset by it. I’m fine with being rejected from this. There are several pages of their interview sheets left, and they’ve only filled in two and a half.

“Thank you, Miss Ericson,” says Fowler. “Those are all the questions we have for you.” I stand and brush my hands on the thighs of my jeans. Guess that’s it, then. Neither of them rises to get the door for me or shake my hand. I let myself out, knowing that I’ve failed, but hey, at least now I can go back to my original plan — killing Crein.

**Author's Note:**

The rest of the novel will be told through synopsis. 45,000 words is a lot, and unfortunately, a school year only allows for so much of a story. But the following will detail the major plot points and characterization that would take place over the second half of the book. These won't be described by chapter but rather by *movement* using what is referred to as the Hollywood Formula. The Hollywood Formula consists of the following set-up, taken from a lecture at the 2015 Out of Excuses Writing Workshop and Retreat:

PERCENTAGE	TITLE	DESCRIPTION
1%	Opening Scene	Establish hook, the main character, why we love them, what this story is gonna be about, the tone
2%-9%	Setting up the Story	Who main characters are, why we love them
10%	Inciting Incident	Main Character's life changes to make them uncomfortable, upset the status quo
11%-24%	Surviving the Change	Figuring out what to do, trying plans that don't work
25%	The Big Decision	Character decides to do something big
26%-49%	Exploring the New World	"Where all the scenes from the trailer come from"
50%	Midpoint	Hero moves from reaction to action, should always be a decision
51%-74%	Return of the Villain	Whoever caused initial problem returns to stir up more shit, leads to...
75%	All is Lost	Loss of a mentor, friend, power, etc we've been relying on to fix problems
76%-84%	Licking Wounds	Sad time you hate in movies where everyone believes the cause is hopeless
85%	Aha! Moment	Discover new plan they



		could not possibly win without, usually related to something learned earlier
86%-100%	The Final Push	Last action bits with the resolution

We have just hit the midpoint, so as you can see, we've got a lot farther to go. I won't follow these exact percentages, but I do plan on following the flow of this type of story in order to tie into the narrative's themes of both staying true to and bucking against the status quo of literature. First, I will finish my thoughts for the Midpoint, and then I will move on to describe what will happen in the other sections.

## MIDPOINT

*Hero moves from reaction to action. Should always be a decision.*

We have begun the Midpoint by having Audrey take the Physical and Emotional Evaluation as the final stage in applying to join the Association of Exceptional Characters. While she thinks that this is probably the best move for her — to change the system from the inside, she is still deeply hurt by what has happened to her. She would much rather change things with violence, and the idea of not getting accepted feels like something more to shrug off than to bemoan. In fact, she finds it to be preferable.

Audrey joins her friends in the dining hall. Sergei, as they suspected, was sent to Comedy, and he enjoyed his time there. He's confident in his ability to interview well, but Kate is nervous about it. After dinner, everyone is brought back into the main hall. A Writer from Romance comes to announce the five people from this branch of Horror who are accepted: two unknowns, Franco, Sergei, and Audrey.

Audrey is completely baffled, but Sergei is too excited to notice. They are told to remain after everyone leaves, and Sergei and Audrey say goodbye to a sobbing Kate. At the meeting for the five accepted members, they are told what their responsibilities would be as members — lots of bookkeeping for now, some visits to other genres, and they would eventually be granted more privileges and involved in Writers' stories. Everyone agrees to join, and then Audrey is held back because "someone" wants to speak to her. Spoiler alert: it's Crein.

**RETURN OF THE VILLAIN**

*Whoever caused initial problem returns to stir up more shit.*

Crein meets with Audrey in his office. He tells her that the only reason she was accepted is because he fought hard for her. Everyone else thought of her as a threat, but he said that her value as a character far surpassed whatever damage she might cause. His reputation is tied to her, and while she might see that as a way to seek revenge, Crein tells her that if she were to be excommunicated from the Association of Exceptional Characters for poor behavior, she would put her family at high risk with amateur Writers who won't care if they're being subversive or not. They'll kill the family nonetheless in order to wrap up her as a loose end. She could always try to save them, but "we saw how that went with Clara." If she stays and makes a good name for herself — which Crein believes to be completely possible, then she can keep her family safe from harm and instead inhabit the lives of other people for the Writers' stories. He points out that his paper and pen are the only things between her and a horrible plot twist.

Audrey is violent and angry at first and tries to strangle him, but Crein wrote something before she came that said when she tried to attack him, she ended up doing nothing but hurting herself. He reiterates His power, and she reluctantly agrees that she'll play along. She would rather respond with violence, but she realizes that if she wants a shot at Him, she'll have to play along.

Audrey and Sergei begin attending classes where they learn more about how all of this works. Sergei is loving it — absolutely loving it. This is everything he has ever dreamed of, and once again, he is at the top of his class. Audrey, however, is obviously very bitter about being here. While distance builds between her and Sergei, she grows closer to Alexandra Franco. A friendship and quiet romance builds between them, and Audrey slowly shares her

disillusionment with Alex. Alex is hesitant to believe her at first, but as they go through “exotic” tours of other genres and see how lives are made purposefully miserable for the sake of a story, Alex comes to her side.

Together, Audrey and Alex decide that on their next tour, which will take place in Comedy, they’re going to escape together, get away from the Writers, and Live Happily Ever After. Audrey decides to invite Sergei, but when she talks to him about it, they get into a huge fight. Sergei believes in the mission of the Association of Exceptional Characters and that they as characters exist only for the service of the Writers. He says that the AEC allows them the only chance they have at controlling their destinies, and the Writers cannot be fought against. They leave on horrible terms, not even speaking once the next outing comes up. Audrey and Alex run away the first chance they get when they’re all transported to Comedy.

## **ALL IS LOST**

*Loss of a mentor, friend, power, etc., we have relied on to fix problems*

Audrey and Alex do not get very far in their escape. They spend two days adapting to fart jokes, heavy sarcasm, and political incorrectness before Genre police show up at their motel door and arrest them. They're forcibly taken back to Horror where they have to confront the upper council about what they did and why they did it. The council tells them that if they apologize and agree to retraining, they will be allowed to slowly work their ways back in and their families will not have to face the repercussions. Alex gives in immediately, but Audrey refuses. While Alex is allowed back in, Audrey — heartbroken and furious — returns home.

**LICKING WOUNDS**

*Sad time in movies where everyone believes the cause to be lost*

Audrey returns home and explains to her parents what has happened. They're disappointed and upset. They send her to her room, and she goes upstairs and ruminates. She calls Kate — she's been so busy with the AEC that the two have barely spoken since induction — and the two talk about what has happened. As Kate starts to become more and more a protagonist of her own story, she has grown more and more upset with the way things are run. Audrey tells her that it's no use fighting it. Nothing can be done.

In the middle of the night, Audrey hears something crashing around downstairs. She investigates and finds it's her monster, which she hasn't seen in so long, covered in blood and destroying everything in sight. It sees her, but no matter what she does, she cannot calm it down. It chases her into her parents' room, and she finds them bloodied but alive. They manage to stay cooped up in the room until daylight, when the monster suddenly leaves. She drives her wounded parents to the hospital and then leaves them there, a packed bag in the back of her car. She drives to Kate's house and arrives unannounced and finds a half-naked Jimmy (scarred from his previous encounter with Audrey). She discovers that apparently Jimmy has gone through his own character development while she was gone. He's still a bit of an asshole, but he seems a much better person. He apologizes for the things he said and did to her, and while Audrey doesn't forgive him, she's thankful for it.

Audrey confides in them both what has happened to her — and her parents. As long as she stays with her parents, the more they'll be in trouble. Anyone around her is bound to be hurt, and so she tells them that she's found herself left with two options: run away or kill herself. Running away could temporarily solve problems, but she would likely grow attached to people

and either have to leave them or watch them die. If she kills herself, though, then she could at least make it appropriate in a way that might lend the Writers to being gentle with those she cares about — and probably allowing her to actually stay dead.

**AHA!**

*Discover new plan they could not possibly win without, usually related to something learned earlier*

Jimmy and Kate discourage Audrey from killing herself. Kate tells her that she should run away, but Jimmy has too much in him for that. He tells Audrey to fight, but she says she's already tried that and explains how Crein foiled her attempts at strangling him. Jimmy says that she should just take the pen and paper for herself. Maybe then she could change her fate. This gives her a brilliant idea, and she embraces them both and says she has to leave.



**FINAL PUSH***Last action bits with the resolution*

Audrey finds Sergei at his house and forces him to talk to her. He isn't keen on it — not only are they no longer friends, but she has been excommunicated. He could be in trouble just for talking to her. Audrey explains everything that has happened, but he refuses to help until she tells him how her parents were nearly killed last night. This bit of new invokes a bit of sympathy from him, and at the risk of getting himself excommunicated, he agrees to help her.

They go to Salem together, and Sergei brings her in by saying that she wants to try to come back to the AEC and atone for what she's done. The staff is skeptical, but they allow it. She is not allowed to be alone, and while she waits, Sergei is sent to fetch Crein, who acts as Audrey's sponsor. Once Crein has left his office, Sergei goes into his office and finds the pen and paper that can change the world. He writes in a new narrative where Crein cannot touch the paper, but rather than forcing himself in as the protagonist, the world changer, he writes what will happen when Audrey and Crein arrive in the office, and he leaves.

When Audrey and Crein come to the office, Sergei has already left. Crein takes the time to gloat and be super creepy. He obviously fantasizes himself with Audrey, wants to write into the story that she falls in love with him but also wants her to come to it on his own. Audrey plays with it for a moment, then takes his pen and paper and quickly scribbles down sentences in render Crein immobile. She gloats, thinks about torturing him, then stops herself. She won't kill him. Instead, she becomes a Writer herself just long enough to strip them of their power. She strips Crein and every Writer of any power they ever had to look into the hearts and minds of characters. She sets up the story so that Sergei leads the revolutionary government that will take

the AEC's place. And finally, she takes away the power of pen and paper and writes that no being should ever again have the power to control another's destiny.

When she finishes, Crein tries to strangle her, but he forgets that he has no physical training and Audrey is a star boxer who has honed her anger through training. She incapacitates him and leaves, finding Sergei waiting for her. She tells him how she wrote the story for him, and he appreciates it. She asks where Alex is, and together they find her. As more and more Writers realize what is happening, the world begins breaking down. Alex's instructor is in the middle of a crisis when the training script isn't working, and Audrey makes him leave so she can talk to Alex. They make amends and join hands to leave the room. She had been sure to write that the Writers' lack of power would be quickly found out, and outside, the world is rioting. Characters attack the Writers, and while Alex says they should help, Audrey stops her. This society is going to come under Sergei, and it's going to work out.

The story ends with them going to Alex's apartment. They go to sleep, and Audrey wakes up to Alex gently shaking her awake. Nothing bad happens. A new world is being created. Audrey is happy.